THE WIFE OF ALTAMONT

VIOLET HUNT

Ex Libris
C. K. OGDEN

THE LIBRARY
OF
THE UNIVERSITY
OF CALIFORNIA
LOS ANGELES

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2008 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation

http://www.archive.org/details/wifeofaltamont00hunt

The Wife of Altamont

New 6s. Novels

WHEN NO MAN PURSUETH. By Mrs. Belloc Lowndes, Author of "Studies in Wives," etc.

DEVIOUS WAYS. By Gilbert Cannan, Author of "Peter Homunculus," etc.

IN THE WAKE OF THE GREEN BANNER. By Eugene Paul Metour.

FORBIDDEN GROUND. By Gilbert Watson.

THE BOOK OF A BACHELOR. By C. Duncan Schwann.

THE SOUTHERNER. By Nicholas Worth.

THE DOP DOCTOR. By Richard Dehan.

THE DEVOURERS. By A. Vivanti Chartres.

LONDON: WILLIAM HEINEMANN
21 Bedford Street, W.C.

The Wife of Altamont

By

Violet Hunt

Author of
"White Rose of Weary Leaf," etc.

London
William Heinemann
1910

Copyright London 1910 by William Heinemann

PR
6015
H91w

TO
MARY MARTINDALE

193214

I

In Hinderland, one cold October day, an important ceremony was toward—nothing less than the solemn christening of a world baby—the work of many fierce and expert hands—the child of capital and labour. This iron infant had been framed to live, breathe, and have its being in the water: the chrism with which it should be launched sacramentally into its element must needs be wine. And to-day, at twelve o'clock, the patient waters of the Arrow would cleave and part to receive a solid body that would astonish them and displace them to the extent of thousands of tons.

In the yard of Messrs. Veere, Avercamp, and Veere, the world-famous shipbuilders of the north, the immense baby lay, inert, on the brink of life till her hour should come. At a given signal, the deft engineer who was responsible for her would release her in the modern way, by the removal of one little wonderful bolt, the knot of the whole complicated system of ligatures which interdepended on its proud insignificancy. That gone, there was nothing to stay the eager nurseling. With a subtle, far-reaching tremor she would move, inappreciably at first, soon so that all men should see and admire the delicacy of her engineer's handling and his dexterity in determining her course. She would settle into her stride, and slip down, with the majestic deliberation of all truly great things, suavely and without effort, as a duck broadens its breast to a slat, and swings out into the mill pond. She would slowly cleave the stream with her keel, and, self-arresting, predestinated, lie down happily on

the sullen surface of the waters. They would close round her, they would lap her evermore, lovingly, faithfully, inseparably, till what time the red rust should overcome her, her corroded plates thin and splinter, and her weakened bolts fall out and leave her disarrayed, and undone. Then, willy-nilly, her splendid life would end; she would sink to the bottom of the sea, or be shamefully scrapped in some derelict dockyard.

Men had made her, men would use her to their ends, men would die in, with her, and through her. She was to be born, launched on her career, henceforth a thing to count with, a fierce, fully armed, monster baby stored with deadly exuberant vitality.

In the breasts of the thousands of eager persons who stood that day on the rough wooden staging of the yard of Messrs. Veere, Avercamp, and Veere, anchored by expectant curiosity to the sticky planks turgid with mud, for it had rained, was raining, and would rain—thoughts such as these, conscious and unconscious, harboured. Collected from the surrounding parts—for country it could not be called where roads, mere channels of communication, ran black-bordered by haggard ghosts of trees—by the absorbing interest of a launch, most of these people had never seen such a thing before, and would probably never care to come so far to give themselves that particular thrill again.

It was new to a young girl, noticeable in the seedy, tweed-clad north-country crowd, by reason of the brilliant hair and colouring which Nature had given her, and the determined shade of the dress she had chosen to set off her beauty. It was of a "whole" colour—no humble slavish mixture for Miss Elizabeth New! Like a bold, blue kingfisher, she flashed out in a crowd of tame brown sparrows, and scorned to hold an umbrella over herself. Other women might fly to that awkward protection to shield the inconsistent borrowed plumage that decked, and, as they would have said, put

"a bit of colour" about them. Elizabeth New rejoiced in the fact that she was self-trimmed: rain might wet, but could not dim, the living glory of her hair.

She was the only daughter of the rather exceptional Vicar of Arske by his cook. He had married the woman all right—he was that kind of man—but the living of Arske was a poor one, and George New, in marrying, was aware that now he would never get a better. No preferment would ever come his way, though Mrs. New, as cooks go, was rather superior and very pretty, albeit of a fluffy, soulless prettiness that soon fades. The gentle vicar did not go about to add to the disadvantages of the position he had made for himself by sulking with life, or bemoaning the consequences of his indulgence of a supreme fit of self-will. Having hastily, carelessly made his bed, he lay on it quietly and did not toss. He did, sometimes, contrive to hint to his young daughter that the habit of taking the bit between one's teeth matrimonially was apt to run in families, and that she must lie in wait with herself to correct a tendency to marry suicidally.

The girl was inclined to be light like her mother, capricious like her father. The scholar and gentleman knew he could have educated and trained his daughter himself: he chose quietly to forego that privilege, for her greater good. He early deprived Mrs. New of her child's society and help by sending her away, as soon as it was possible, to a much better school than he could afford, and keeping her there as long as he could and while he could not. He was in favour of her accepting visits in between her terms, if possible. Young Elizabeth, being of a gregarious disposition, and possessing long golden hair, that strong power of attraction in schoolgirls for other schoolgirls, was snapped up for every week of her holidays by adoring fellow-students with amusing, luxurious homes.

She never perhaps realised, so softly did he perform the sacrifice, the self-effacement, the tactful resignation of the

male parent, patiently enduring, up there in his lonely north-country parish, the deprivation of what might have been the light of his days, and taking on himself the whole weight of the society of the underbred woman he had chosen to make the mother of his child. They always seemed the same, the girl thought, "sweet stick-in-the-muds," "dear good pottering people," when she returned, to do up her wardrobe—in which art her mother showed a facility amounting to genius—to lie by for a little, to tell her father about the different people, the various strata of society she had seen and studied, to show her mother what was worn and how to wear it.

She was quite sure that she had a happy home; she did not really test it, she was in it so seldom—after she left school hardly at all. The father's academic, rather pedantic precision and calm envisagement of unalterable fact; the mother's sweet silliness, and unaggressive commonness, produced and maintained at an even level the atmosphere of cheap comfort and devitalised amenity that she always came back to with a conscious, restful pleasure.

Her latest flight had been as far as London, where she had roomed for a couple of months with another girl, a worker and a Suffragette. That was fine! She liked raids, and street speaking, and banner carrying. She learned a trick of easy frankness, a confraternity of outlook, in her intercourse with women. With men she flirted distantly, Artemis-like, combining a certain coarseness of fibre incurred on her mother's side with traces of her father's delicacy and fastidiousness.

Some one had given her a white and superior ticket for the launch. People always did give her things. She had come into Hinderland by train early to do some shopping. She got through it quickly, and arrived in good time at the yard. Now, with two large packages of drapery purchases in her hand, she waited patiently in the rain for the culmi-

nating moment of the show, peering about curiously, craning up her neck, at the risk of letting her rather seedy hat fall off, and loosening the one or two pins that cleverly restrained, without impeding, the artful flow backwards of her masses of reddish-gold hair. It was a trick, arrived at through many a frenzied moment of sustained effort in the silence of her chamber. The rites of dress might and did absorb much of her time. She was apt to think of many totally irrelevant things in terms of toilette. Staring at the shape of the thin, gracile creature that towered above her, its polished sides scooped out to the last degree of refinement, she was irresistibly borne towards a sartorial comparison. The delicate bevel of the iron plates that formed the keel reminded her of the subtle *échancrure* of a pair of woman's stays.

From the point where she stood, the vanishing curves suggested, not so much a deep-bellied vessel constructed to absorb and carry whole armaments, but a mere sharp weapon of offence, a projectile waiting to be fired off. The gold lettering, fore-shortened, of the name on the stern she could not have distinguished unless she had known it. The vessel was built by Messrs. Veere, Avercamp, and Veere for the Cimmerian Government, and it was named the *Elisabetta*. The bottle of champagne, decked with ribands of the national colour, hung dangling from the stern in apt juxtaposition to the platform, covered with red baize, which had been erected for the gorgeously attired lady and her friends who stood there ready to break the bottle against the ship as soon as the signal should have been given. She was the wife of the Cimmerian ambassador, and the stout man at her side was, so Elizabeth was given to understand, the Admiral of the Cimmerian Fleet.

Elizabeth watched all these people eagerly, and did not scruple to ask any questions that she wanted to know of the bystanders. She was not shy. But there was one active personage, whose name she rather wished to ascertain, but

did not succeed in doing so. He was slight, serious, and pale, and she liked his looks, though his eyes were too small. They rested on her once, attracted by the colour of her hair. She was used to that passing form of tribute.

A hush fell upon the chattering, bustling crowd. It was the hour! . . . Some faint, metallic sounds were heard. ,

"She's moving—she's moving now!" said a man near to Elizabeth. "Not that you'll notice it till the lady gives the tap—and hardly even then!"

"Success to the *Elisabetta!*"

The formal words were inaudible, except to the fair speaker's immediate neighbours, but the clash of the broken bottle warned all that they were being said. Furthermore, there was the ridiculously inadequate libation of froth that showed on the shining black surface. Elizabeth, as the man beside her had advised her to do, had previously counted the bolt-heads discernible on the hitherside of one of the supports of the platform—there had been five; now there were only four, and the squat, round blob of iron appeared beyond the limit. . . . No quicker than that! . . .

Yet she moved. A tense shout! She moved indeed!

She moved, she raced, she tore down the even slope! It was almost terrible! But Elizabeth was glad she had come. She felt now as if her very heart was being pulled out of her body, as if her whole being were stirred, torn, nay, dragged down to the shore of the Arrow along with the leaping, healthy, newly freed monster. A sense of disintegration was hers, of emptiness, giddiness, induced by the sight of the useless slats that were left jumping behind in its track, and the painful elimination from her view of the upstanding stern to which she had grown accustomed, and the red platform looking foolish, left behind. . . .

The showy, golden-haired girl burst into tears!

Others wept too, doubtless, but Elizabeth felt herself alone in her disgrace. Nobody noticed her except the pale, slim,

serious young man who was marshalling some smart people down the improvised steps of the platform, and warning them to be careful.

"Down this way, Lady Sternways, for the luncheon and the speeches! . . . Take care. We have a covered way underground. It's drier. . . ."

He and his stout convoy passed Elizabeth, who was still helplessly dabbing her eyes with her pocket-handkerchief. He spoke to her, threading his words, as it were, on the general string of directions to Lady Sternways.

"Down here, yes. Then we're under cover." To Elizabeth, "Is it your first launch? A moving sight, isn't it?"

"Yes," Elizabeth murmured.

"I've seen dozens, of course. But still. . . . Come and listen to the speeches?"

"But they're mixed up with the lunch?"

"Yes. Come and lunch too?"

"Can I?"

"If I ask you. I'm Mr. Veere. . . . Yes, down there. Follow me, next time I come along with a dowager. . . . Then you can drink the health of the *Elisabetta* in champagne!"

She followed him and a large and important-looking lady the next time he descended the steps. The road passed down by an easy gradient, and they fared along underground for a time in a passage lit by dim lamps. The young man looked back now and then, and encouraged her by a busy, preoccupied smile. Then they ascended again and proceeded, in their hundreds, up some steps and into a large sky-lighted place, where tables were laid transversely. One table, slightly raised, bisected them—the High Table, of high report.

Her friend escorted his charge to a place somewhere near the middle of it, and Elizabeth waited again, standing by the corner of one of the cross tables and following him with intelligent, obedient eyes.

"Now," said he, coming back quickly, "I want you to hear. I'm going to speak. Up here, see? Slip in, close to the big-wigs."

Seated at this abutting corner by the High Table where he had so kindly placed her, she noticed that there were only men. Stealing a look at the cards that lay in front of their places, she read such labels as these: "Representative of *The Sweep*," "Representative of *The Hinderland Leader*," and realised that she was among the reporters. That did not frighten her. She was a Suffragette, and had attended, and even stewarded, many meetings.

These gentlemen fed heartily and allowed their champagne glasses to be filled to the brim, but they did not drink. Elizabeth drank hers readily, and understood how the inspiriting beverage may prepare and inure the intelligence to long speeches heard by those whose business it is not to report them. While eating her sandwiches, she asked the young man who happened to be seated next to her the name of her benefactor.

"Veere. Mr. Ernest Rose Veere. Son of one partner. Nephew of Sir Joris Veere, the man at the head of the table."

Something in the tone in which he said this impelled Elizabeth to look more closely at her neighbour. Into the mere three-letter word *man* he had contrived to throw a venom such as should hardly proceed from the mere good-humoured reporter. First at his card, which bore the name of a newspaper that was familiar to her—*The Sweep*. . . .

She thought that he must be a foreigner. He had blue-black hair, crested a little on his forehead, and a pert, but scanty moustache. His lips were red and vivid, his eyes dull and spiritless. His hands were white, and his nails fine and beautifully, but rather over-polished. Slight and thin, there was something about his figure which reminded her of that of her kind introducer here, and now she came to think of it, in the face too, especially about the forehead! . . .

Absurd, a reporter, and Mr. Ernest Rose Veere!

The toast master gave out the healths of the distinguished Cimmerians present, followed by those of the Veeres and Avercamps. There was no Lady Veere, apparently? Had there ever been one? Or was she dead?

The healths were drunk. It was the turn of the speeches. "Now to work!" observed the reporters, smiling, and pencils flew to paper. She listened attentively to the speeches, though they were of the usual "Pleasure of meeting you all here to-day!" and "What I should like to say" variety. The speech made by Sir Joris, however, had a quality of its own. It was poignant, personal, and to the point. The fine, bluff, bearded old man spoke it fluently, in a voice that showed signs of age.

"He never wrote that himself," said her neighbour. "That's some of Master Ernest's bluff, I can tell you."

He reported it, nevertheless.

Then young Veere spoke. A good speech, too, ancillary to his uncle's.

"Rather too close to the old man's," again observed the young reporter at her side. Under the influence of Elizabeth's eyes he seemed to have become less taciturn. "But he's a clever go-ahead chap. What I can't stand is his damned insufferable manner! Been too much in America."

"Has he?" said the young girl, faintly interested. The field of her observation, which young Veere had bid fair to monopolise, was now being encroached on by her more flashy, impressive neighbour.

"Oh, yes, they were determined to get him out of the rut —work up the family, see? They're awful swells now; but, of course, you know that the first Veere, this man's grandfather, was a marine storekeeper, here in a back street of Hinderland, and rose."

"That's always a sign of cleverness."

"Certainly. Far be it from me to blacken the family. All I meant to say was that they are quite self-made people, originally Dutch, with the vices of parvenus. That is to say, they go one better in dissipation than the people who've been rich all along and got used to it!"

"They go nap and then bust, don't they?" said Elizabeth, smiling. "You are talking like an article in *The Sweep*. We take in *The Sweep* at home, mother and I. Father says it's hog-wash."

"People seem to enjoy hog-wash. And people like me must live by providing it. Well, as I was saying, the great Sir Joris has been every sort of man, up to every sort of game. You wouldn't think to look at him as he sits at the High Table so dignified, and smug——"

"What dreadful things are you hinting at?" said the young girl comfortably. "Do you know you strike me as having a very bad mind—and tongue! I suppose you mean he's lived, that's all."

Her pinkness and innocence seemed to undo the cynicism of her words. It was as though a spring lamb should be caught performing an elaborate piece of step-dancing, skipping in tune with its artless fellows along the hawthorn hedges. She continued, really enjoying herself: "Is there a Lady Veere, then?"

"No, he never was married."

"You've put an accent on the married," said she recklessly. "What is known as a gay bachelor—eh? Well, you seem to know them all very well, for a reporter—just down for the day from London—aren't you?"

The reporter bent his tragic eyes upon her, and saw that she was fair. An immense need of sympathy, a desire to trust in this soft, skittish young thing, overcame him. He confided in her.

"Would you like me to tell you how it is that I am so up in the family?"

"Yes," she replied impulsively, and sealed her fate.
"Because Sir Joris Veere is my father."

He told her all about it in the little tea-place where she allowed him to take her afterwards. The daughter of the cook and the savant, girlishly interested and curious on all subjects, democratically careless of personal dignity, felt no hesitation in setting up an intimacy with this handsome, portentous young man with a history he was burning to repeat. She listened with a lax and fascinating camaraderie; she was interested—he had the journalistic touch, and could put things dramatically. Squalid details he spared her; he already cared not to alienate her nascent liking for him. Her happy, cordial nature seemed to him the fit complement to his dour, retiring one. His *sæva indignatio* lay deep, his wrongs burnt in on his heart for ever; with her, it was easy to see, anything in the nature of a grievance would not "lie"—no more than snow in spring. To the hard-worked waitress, who, as Elizabeth noticed, he tipped handsomely, they seemed a handsome, heaven-destined pair. And the other bored functionary at the high desk heard him plainly say, as he helped the young lady on with her coat, which she had doffed on coming in and draped over the back of her chair, so as to show her fresh, home-washed blouse and round, uncovered arms—

"I should like you to know my mother, Miss Altamont." The young lady at the desk thought that odd, and so did Elizabeth.

"Miss Altamont?" she asked, interrogatively, as they walked together out into the street.

"My mother was an actress. It's the name she was known by on the stage. And it happens to be mine."

II

Elizabeth Altamont rose late of a morning. A constitution like hers needed a great deal of sleep. She did not, however, allow this comparative sluggishness of habit to interfere with the performance of her housewifely functions, wherein, without precisely excelling, she was equal to the average. Her daily duties were strictly laid down for her by herself; she knew to a penny how much money she had got to keep house on. Her husband contributed nothing to the expenses, although he had some ill-defined occupation connected with finance which furnished him with pocket-money. He had long since given up, or been relieved of that post on *The Sweep*, which had been the cause of their meeting at the launch of the *Elisabetta* at Hinderland, and subsequent hasty engagement and marriage.

Though Wilfrid Altamont's personal income was thus solidly diminished, he knew that he could still rely on his board and lodging under his stern mother's roof when he chose to claim it, and that no questions would be asked of him when he did so choose. His absences were frequent, amounting to more than half his time. His letters were not forwarded, it mattered to no one where he had been. Even if his periodical excursions were, as he said, connected with business, the proceeds of these financial negotiations did not find their way to the family coffers. If, as was then presumed by the household, things had worked out badly, he sometimes allowed himself on his return to fall into the vulgar error of knocking his wife about.

Seven years of union with the man of her choice had turned the careless easy-going girl of Hinderland into a bitter intro-

spective woman. She was good stuff; her temper was not spoiled, she merely proceeded to hate Wilfrid Altamont, her one fatal and permanent mistake, with a quiet intensive hatred that at her age fortunately was powerless to affect or alter a line or a curve of her face. She did not brood, or nurse her wrongs; she just "said things"! Her husband knew by now that his wife fully realised his vanity, his meanness, his perversity and morbidity. Though she loudly proclaimed that she expected no good of him, she as loudly scouted the idea of any splendid sin on his part, any desperate and picturesque criminality. So far she was right. Dreary year after dreary year passed, and Wilfrid showed only as a wastrel of sorts, living on his mother, and neglecting his placable wife. A single scar, aptly placed on her forehead in a region where she could hide it with her magnificent hair, stood for the solitary symptom of ill-treatment. He had given her no child, which in the interests of humanity she could not regret, though as an individual she desperately longed for one.

The promise held out to her in the little Hinderland restaurant of a meeting with Wilfrid's mother had been a powerful factor in her acceptance of the son. She had fallen in love with that lady at first sight. She was extraordinarily impressed by the ex-dancer and glory of the stage, by that time a stout dignified invalid of sixty, unable to walk without a stick, and hardly then. What the young girl had so liked about the woman, the item of her pose which had struck her bold young imagination, was this —that with regard to the vital fact of her life, Miss Altamont neither admitted nor reserved. The maiden prefix—her grown-up son who lived with her and was proud of her—there was no need to say more! Elizabeth considered it so splendid and sensible that she should have chosen to adopt this permanent antithesis as her social signboard, her wordless explanation—if any were sought—of Worksop House and three hundred a year paid her by Sir Joris Veere in

quarterly instalments. No one entered her house—the house paid for by the father of her son—on false pretences. That under these conditions, people, and people of some standing, did cross her threshold, was her blue ribbon, proudly worn. Whatever her history might evidence of weakness, of cupidity, it proved that she had heaps of character, not all of it bad. Even her own pettifogging little world of Wimbledon conceded as much. Elizabeth thought her all good, and after a fortnight's delay and five teas at Worksop House, married the son on his mother's merits, and his own face. He was abominably good-looking.

She was now nearly thirty. For the last seven years she had been Miss Altamont's nurse. The old woman had grown so stout, and had suffered such severe health complications, that she was unable to leave her room. Her daughter-in-law nurse-tended her. She had schooled herself in this connection to be thoughtful, businesslike, long-suffering; had modified herself all for love, being naturally of a careless, an easy-going and high-spirited disposition. She liked to sit up and potter about until the small hours, she now went to bed early, because it was quite on the cards, given the state of Miss Altamont's health, that her nurse might have to watch all night. She disliked very much hanging over the fire, for it tended to ruin her complexion, but she cooked all Miss Altamont's meals herself, and did not allow Georgiana Jack, the untidy "general" whose services were all their income allowed them, to enter the sick-room at all. She herself did not care what she ate, her splendid health was proof even against Georgiana's dough. Wilfrid, so she conceived, had had claims on her housewifely capabilities, he must, and did, settle things with Georgiana, when he cared to be at home. That grew to be more seldom as time went on, and his indifferent, yet resentful wife, did not seek to keep him at her side by means of cleverly devised dishes. The time was past for all that.

Worksop House, of which Julia Altamont, spinster, was the long leaseholder, had been, thirty years ago, a fine red-brick house, standing in its own grounds. The garden had now been built over, and the old Georgian relic stood faded, unnoticeable, crowded out, as number fifty-eight, High Street, Perton. But when the tall unpretending door—perched up on two big steps like horse blocks—was opened, the educated visitor had a vision of pure eighteenth century, in the knobby carved staircase, the old panelling of the walls, the low-pitched ceiling, though the fan over the outer door, the swags over the inner, were all chipped now, and the paint of the walls blistered and crumbling into decay. And should the tall, stout figure of Miss Altamont herself chance to cross the hall, as in earlier days, wearing her black dress, covered by her silk apron, with the quiet keys that did not jingle, so softly did they lie moored at her waist, the illusion would have been complete.

There was not one square yard of flooring that was horizontal in Worksop House, not an upright that was perpendicular; low drooping ceilings and crooked skirting boards, wherein mice scuttled and went about their affairs day and night, made up an antique, uncomfortable, unhygienic *ensemble* that neither Wilfrid Altamont or his wife appreciated, for rather various reasons.

Miss Altamont's professed Philistinism was merely superficial, and connected with her intense underlying bitterness. Every one in Wimbledon knew that Worksop House, however charmingly rococo and old-world, represented the wages of sordid Early Victorian sin, and though the daughter-in-law brazened it out, she felt her husband's mother's position deeply. The innocent word "Georgian" had come with her to mean "suburban," and "suburban," she averred, was to be the word that, when she came to die, would be written on her heart. The prejudice coloured her whole speech, and warped her very life. She loudly discounted and flouted all

forms of culture developed by the denizens of the detested *milieu* she was rooted in, held there by her cult and sincere affection for an old, unregenerate, dying woman.

Miss Julia Altamont's bedroom—the best—was the furthermost of a chain of three opening one out of the other, and occupying the whole of the first storey. Mrs. Altamont slept in the outermost section, the intermediate one being reserved as a sort of anteroom. The uneven floor of it was a drunkard's dream ; it had no carpet.

At half-past eight one autumn morning Georgie, the maid, called Mrs. Altamont as usual (she possessed no watch), and planted two jugs full of water, one hot and one cold, on the bare floor of the anteroom, and brought to the bedside the early cup of tea on which her young mistress broke her fast, literally eating nothing till the middle of the day. She did much work on that cup of tea.

Georgie's rap was not a sound to ignore. Briskly Mrs. Altamont rose and took her bath in the anteroom without disturbing Miss Altamont, without even inquiring into the invalid's condition after the long night. It was better so. But sometimes, sponge in hand, the water rustling off her polished body, she would suspend operations and stare nervously at that door, which some morning, any morning, might be closed on a death-bed ! Early dead—or sleeping late—the dear, dear old thing ! Sometimes, overcome by her imagination, the young woman found herself tingling all over with horror. Yet methodically she proceeded with the work of ablution ; she would not break through her rule of leaving the subject of her fears severely alone until breakfast time.

Throwing on a blue *peignoir*, carefully chosen to suit her complexion, she brushed up her beautiful hair into a hasty but not unbecoming knot, without attempting to dress it in the elaborate fashion by whose means she would exhibit all its splendour later on, and left her room.

She minced down the broad staircase with its rickety steps, of so slight a gradient that each one was a separate shock of unexpected triviality. She touched the banister once as she went down, for form's sake, and took into account a distinct smudge on her delicate hand. A look of disgust, succeeded by an adumbration of the scolding that was Georgie's due, crossed her face. Then a slight shrug in the direction of a glass door underneath the stairs that led to Georgie's quarters, spoke of her kind manumission of the forfeit. One girl couldn't do everything in a rambling old house like this, where there were so many surfaces and so few conveniences.

At the bottom of the flight, Ginger, the yellow house cat, came forth from some catly fastness or other, and threaded itself in and out of the banisters in her honour. She stroked it lazily with her foot, and it left her and went and sat down at the door of her husband's study.

Wilfrid slept, when he was at home, in a sort of airy closet opening out of a room on the ground floor that he was pleased to call by that name. It was scantily, carelessly furnished, a chair or two, a couple of cupboards in the panelling, and a big unwieldy *secretaire* he had purchased for himself. There he would often sit for the whole day to brood—and drink. One of the cupboards held the wherewithal to do so. His reveries were respected by all, including Georgiana, who likewise respected the thick dust that collected in his sanctum, according to his orders. She did not attempt to raise it or his temper, of which she was reasonably afraid. In hot and cold blood he called her by the derogatory appellation, "Slavey," and this roused a strong spirit of opposition in his wife, which led her to be an angelic mistress—almost a friend to Georgie.

Wilfrid was not averse to the cat; and, indeed, it was the only creature in the house that showed any predilection for his society. But he had been away from home for three days,

and it was odd that the cat, who knew everything, did not know that.

Mrs. Altamont opened the door of the study and looked in.

Wilfrid was there! She mechanically fastened the neck of her *peignoir*, as she would have done for the butcher's man or the plumber suddenly introduced by a careless servant.

He was sitting, his head a little bowed, at the odious cheap writing-table, with the five long drawers that could never be got in again after one had been venturesome enough to open them, and a sliding top that would not slide. She spoke, still keeping her hand on the knob of the door.

"When did you come back?"

"Last night. I didn't disturb you."

"Why should you? And——" She stopped prudently, but the sour intention in her tone nettled him.

"Mind your own business. Has the doctor been since I left?"

"Yes."

"How does he say my mother is?"

"He says she may last several months, or pop off—those were his words—any minute. I don't know how that falls in with your views, but I mean to keep her here as long as I can. She wants care—more care—and always care. I'll give it. I am fond of your mother."

"I know, and she's fond of you, damn you! You've got a common bond."

"What?" she asked idly.

"Disapproval of me. I know that you two amuse yourselves abusing me all day! You haven't a good word for me, either of you! I'm all that's beastly, according to my wife and my mother. Yet——" He flicked a quill pen against his thumb, broke it, and threw it away. She followed it with her eyes into the waste-paper basket. "It's odd, when you come to think of it, she bore me and you married me!"

"Both in error!" she replied quickly. "But you were

fairly plausible in those days—quite good-looking. You are not bad-looking now, Wilfrid, if you didn't drink so."

A caressing, pleading, characteristic intonation, subtly, and as it were against her will, crept into her voice. It had no effect on him.

"Drink! Yes—why not? Oh, I own to all the vices implanted in me by my gentlemanly forbears."

"Don't, Wilfrid, you sicken me."

"Born in shame—so you said," he went on. "Married to a woman with a tongue like a whip lash. My wretched home where I live on sufferance, my restrictions abroad through want of money, the sight of this filthy, old, ill-adjusted world turning so coolly on its beastly misplaced axis——!"

"Why do you waste all this on me? Make an article of it."

"I couldn't write a line in the state I'm in now. You've worked me up—as usual, damn you! My head's like a lump of lead, and my chest aches!"

She knew he was phthisical. She said more quietly, "You always think worse of the world after you come back from a week's outing, don't you?"

"Some insinuation there?" he remarked with affected carelessness. This was one of the moments in his intercourse with her that he courted and yet dreaded. He always hoped that in a reckless mood she might throw off some of the reserve that was a *parti pris* with her and his mother, and reveal the extent of her acquaintance with his affairs. This time he was not disappointed. She rose to the gibe. She was tired, and nervous.

"Of course there is! Do you think I don't know where you go?"

"Where do I go, you fool?"

"To Camberwell, to see that other fool you keep there."

"She's no fool. She loves me, and she knows I love her. Don't you pity her, she's all right."

"Oh, I've no doubt your mistress has a better time of it than your wife. The inestimable treasure of your love! But, Wilfrid, believe me, if she *was* your wife she'd end by feeling as I do. Instead of hating me, and envying me my position, as I expect she does, and sending you back to me as sulky as a bear, she'd much better make up her mind to enjoy you, in your good-tempered moods that we are never permitted to see, and thank her stars that she is free to get rid of you the moment you aren't nice to her. Free! Free! Free! Lucky woman! I wish I was her! Good God! how I long to be my own mistress, to take my poor life back again that I gave you, my life you've mauled and played the mischief with because you're selfish and mad——"

"Mad?" He whisked round. She saw her advantage.

"Yes, you are mad, with vanity and envy and out-of-work-ness. I sheer pity you, that's what I do—you and your poor shaky, groggy system, and overweening opinion of yourself! Work! Not you, except gilt-edged work, or shady financial touting that your pals don't even see their way to giving you! When thieves don't even trust thieves, good Lord——!"

She paused. He had not retorted, but sat still, his head resting in his hand.

She left the security of the door handle, and wrapping her *peignoir* firmly round her, came into the room and sat down opposite him. She spoke more softly, in almost motherly tones:

"What's up now? What has she been saying or doing to upset you so? You had better tell me—get it off your mind—consult some one outside. I'm the best friend you've got. Two heads are better than one full of whisky! Don't look on me as your wife—*I* don't dwell on it, I'm sure—and tell me what it's all about this time."

He looked at his wife wistfully. "To tell you the truth——"

"Yes, do, for once."

"I was sitting with her last night up to nearly midnight, arguing. I'm dead tired, body and brain. I've walked all the way home from Camberwell. Since I left her she's been out and posted a letter to me. Shows how keen she is on her plan——"

"What's her plan?"

"Well, if you must know, she's on at me—has been for the last month or so—to have another go at the old man——"

"Sir Joris? Never!"

"Yes. She wants me to have another try at him—a personal interview this time! Letters, she says, are no good. No more they are, I've found that. That d—d young cousin of mine opens them, and takes good care not to pass them on."

"He's getting an old man now, and they don't want him worried. Well, go on."

"Ada—her name's Ada——"

"Thanks, I know."

"Ada thinks if I could once get at him—if he were to see me personally—that I'm decent-looking, and like him, and all that, you know, he might begin to look on things in a new light, and see that he ought to do something for me and——"

She interrupted. "And her! I see. On my word, I think I never heard of such a disgusting plan. Fancy going and pestering an old man that you've neither of you got any claim on, and reminding him of obligations he's discharged long ago. You want him to grant you an interview—so that you can get a chance to cadge on him, you and your mistress! Why don't you take her with you? I daresay she'd show up well! What's her type? Gibson girl? . . . Well, I have nothing whatever to do with it. It isn't for me you're doing it—or for yourself even. . . . I have a home here, and so have you, Wilfrid. Realise that, for the old man and his advisers certainly will. And don't you let your mother know what you mean to do, unless you're in a hurry to inherit, for

you'll upset her dreadfully. She's got no principle in the world but one, and that's not to have Sir Joris annoyed in any way. She's a good woman, she keeps her bargain. He behaved well to her and she to him, while it lasted. When it was over, he provided for her and you, too, and for your wife —one of your wives! We can all three live uncomfortably on him—comfortably, indeed, if you helped to support us, and if your mother hadn't paid out so much capital to give you your start in life, and sent you to a good school and so on. I don't blame her for that; he intended it, I expect, when he was so generous to her. You can never say you didn't have your chance. You had it and lost it. So do let an honest man alone, the man who knew how to treat your mother properly, and who hoped to have paid himself clear of such encumbrances as you. Some men don't worry about entanglements of that sort, I can tell you——"

"For God's sake, shut up, Betsey! If you only knew how my head ached!"

She stopped dead.

"I'm sorry. I have said more than I meant. And it's not the least bit of good, either. . . ."

She came nearer to him and took up the bottle that stood near his elbow.

"I'll have this," she remarked quietly. She put it into the cupboard that was further away instead of the one that stood open, and rammed the door fast with an extra turn of force. Returning to her husband, she removed the weak white hand that hid his face. . . .

"Look here, Wilfrid, if I know you at all, I can see that you are working yourself up for an act of folly! . . ."

He resisted her, putting his hands back to his forehead and shaking his head.

"Tiresome man! I can't say I thank Ada for sending you back to me with your head stuffed with idiotic plans in her own interest that can't possibly come off. . . . Will you

look me in the face, Wilfrid? I'm serious. . . . I want to make you understand that it is, at all events, no good your going to Sir Joris Veere without your mother's backing, and that she'll never give it. She's game, and will be to the last. She's a splendid woman, and to tell you the truth, if it weren't for her I wouldn't stay with you another hour!"

"Try to keep yourself out of it, you d—d egotist! You stay here as her nurse, not as my wife. You'll get your way—she'll not cumber you long. She has probably left all her money to you?"

"I don't know, I'm sure."

"Things," said he wearily, "are in such a tangle now that even if I were successful and the old man did fork out——"

"You wouldn't know how to allocate the shares, would you?" she assented, taking refuge from the impulse to brutal straight speaking in her sense of humour. She laughed horribly, with her sweet red mouth. "Let me see! You—me—Ada——?"

"And two young children." He watched the effect of his speech on her.

He recoiled, for she turned on him like a tiger cat. But her face, when he took in the sense of it, was not sternly or vindictively made up. It was, on the contrary, dulled and blighted with sudden mental suffering.

"I didn't know that, Wilfrid! On my word, I didn't. It—it alters——" she covered her eyes with her hands. "Oh, Wilfrid, you *have* hurt me!"

"Why? I never knew you wanted a child."

"I did—once. And you——" she dashed a tear out of her eyes. "It's no matter. I suppose you wouldn't have let this last fact out if you hadn't been drunk?"

"I told you because I was on the edge of a great resolve."

"Resolve! Nonsense! I shall speak to your mother, and tell her to make you hear reason."

"My mother can't stop me. Tell her what you like. As

a matter of fact, I believe she knows all about Wilfrid and little Katie."

She shuddered.

"You needn't shudder. They're nice little children—not a bit like their father. Now you see why I have to have money—more money! By the way, before you go tell me how you got to know about Ada? Did my mother tell you?"

"No; she isn't so keen on talking about you. It is because you leave your papers about so recklessly. I warn you everything I find I read—in self-defence. That letter you've just had from Ada, written, as you say, by the last post——" She pointed to an open drawer. "There, next your case of pistols! You'll try and shut that drawer, you'll fail, you'll swear, and you'll leave it. Later on I shall have the pleasure of reading it."

"Damn you! Cat!"

He rose and went for her then. She escaped with a small contused wound on her left wrist, and her mouth twisted awry with derision and pain.

III

Betsey entered Miss Altamont's room and drew the curtains more roughly than usual, because she had just been knocked about, and her hands trembled. Then she turned round to the curtainless bed, and saw what she saw every morning, and hoped to see for a great many mornings more—a fair, fresh face, of almost faultless contour, round which a close-fitting lace nightcap was drawn with exactitude. And this vision, first seen after the long gulf of the night, daily suggested the same idea to Betsey. This moon face, grave, fresh, pink, had been a field, first for the economic struggle, and afterwards for the devastating emotions of sex and the scorings of maternity. Jocasta, in frills; Cornelia, cursed, not blessed in her child; the valiant mother of a *fainéant!* Out of strength; weakness. Reason doomed, bringing irresponsibility into the world!

She kissed the bland old lady there where the lace edging of the cap met the waxen forehead. "Good morning!" she murmured, keeping her bleeding wrist behind her. There was no need to prove to her mother-in-law that her children's mutual relation was apt to be strained at times. Then, thrusting her hands into a pair of housemaid's gloves, she knelt down and proceeded to rake out the ashes of the fire that had died last night, and prepare a new one.

"Wilfrid is back," she remarked, in the intervals of ash-scraping and coal-laying. "He inquired what the doctor had said about you."

"A graceful act!" pronounced the cold, hard voice from

the bed. "And you told him about the aneurism that may leak any day, did you? Did it impress him?"

"Well—he was rather queer this morning—"

"Been drinking?"

"Ada—more! She's been worrying him!"

The fire crackled and danced. Betsey rose from her knees, shook down her skirts, replaced the gloves under the fender stool, seized her housemaid's box, and departed downstairs again to fetch Miss Altamont's breakfast, which Georgie was even now preparing.

Wilfrid's study door was open. She peeped in, and saw that he had got the whisky bottle out of the cupboard again and sat there drinking. The cat sat beside him. He caressed it now and then. . . . She paused, dubious. Her wrist smarted. . . .

"Now that he's settled down to it," she thought, "he'll forget about going to see Sir Joris, perhaps."

She decided not to set his mother at him, but closed the door quietly and proceeded with the order of the day.

She took up a well-furnished breakfast tray—the toast she had made herself—and watched Miss Altamont, propped on snowy cushions, consume it. The cushions had lace on them. It was Betsey's theory that old ladies, like babies, needed frills and fluffiness to make them go down. Then she "got her up." Miss Altamont's was a long, deliberate, and complicated toilette. When it was completed, she assumed her position for the day in the old knobby carved chair which was Betsey's own, and which had once stood in the vestry of her father's church. Sitting stiffly enthroned near the window, shiny stained boards leading the eye up to the sort of formal entablature she made with her invalid appointments, the old lady looked like an ivory-carven Buddha. Her white-frilled nightcap had given place to a black-frilled day-cap, close and tight like the other one. Her dull black dress and shiny silk apron draped an obesity which was hardly

vulgar, since it was the result, not of self-indulgence, but of a mortal complaint. She was a very tall woman, with majestic shoulders, and no suggestion of a stoop. Her broad white forehead was like chiselled soapstone, her ears, small and set well back, bore heavy gold drop ear-rings on their tiny lobes. This was all the jewellery she chose to wear. Her lips were suave and full, red with a tendency to a purpler hue. She had kept all her strong teeth, small and sharp like a Frenchwoman's. Her eyes were grey and keen, but not remarkable; her neat little nose, and the ghostly straight line of the bridge of it, gave Betsey an indefinable sense of moral assurance.

The younger woman cherished, but could not define, a perverse but real feeling of reverence for this popular personification of Vice Triumphant. Vice was hardly the word. Julia Altamont might have been wicked, but never vicious. Her appearance, in her daughter-in-law's opinion, was a guarantee of her immunity from the meaner forms of moral disease. Perhaps she had shed these tendencies, if she had ever possessed them, in the production of her son Wilfrid, who stood for the outcome of the inferior instincts of her nature. She did not love him; she had never caressed him since his curls were cut off and he told his first mean lie. She was ashamed of her gumboil, her imposthume, and said so, cordially disowning him. Both these women now stood mentally aloof, and gazed at the creature that the one had brought into the world to be the life-partner of the other.

It was all so long ago, and Miss Julia Altamont had not so much gained as dropped into a sort of a position, the result of her neighbours' unconscious appreciation of the questionable personage's force of character. Miss Altamont's inevitable invalidism served the purpose of an apt social manœuvre and relieved her of the necessity of testing her right of *entrée* into suburban homes. It was "the thing" to be kind to her; people went to see her—to "sit with her," as they put it.

The cynical effrontery which was the basis of her character amused those who did not understand it; she dissembled it cleverly during her reception of visits from clergymen, for which she had a certain malignant predilection. It pleased her to pay church rate without entering the doors of the building whose upkeep she assisted to provide; she enjoyed giving tea to the vicar of her parish, on the express condition that he was not to talk to her about her soul. Miss Altamont's soul, to the Rev. Sydney Barnes, seemed a hard thing to tackle, and he preferred to believe and say that, in some mysterious way, things worked together for good, even in a *ménage* so doubtfully policed by accredited guardian angels as Worksop House.

Seated in the full light, with her daughter-in-law ministering to her, the old lady, who "had her eyes" and needed no spectacles, noticed the bleeding arm, and realised its *provenance.*

"Where did you get that?" she asked dryly.

"The cat." After a pause: "I was teasing him," Betsey added cynically. "I can't help it, somehow, when he comes back from that woman. Rouses all the worst in my nature. I'm not jealous, not I, but I do resent her sending him back to me in such a bad temper always. And putting ideas into his head just when he's a bit low and can't resist them, but gets them on his mind. I must tell you, Granny, he threatened this morning to go and worry Sir Joris for money."

"I've told him I wouldn't have that!" exclaimed Miss Altamont, rising in her chair. She subsided again by a strong exercise of will.

"I will *not* excite myself!" she exclaimed. "It may kill me—make the blessed aneurism leak!"

"It strikes me you are quite proud of that old aneurism," said Betsey, smiling.

"And Wilfrid isn't worth it, either. . . . Besides, Sir Joris wouldn't see him. He will know how to protect himself.

He always did. Betsey, did you happen to remind my precious son of my views on the subject?"

"Yes. That's why he hit me. I said a good deal. To tell you the drunken, honest truth, I don't believe he'll go at all. He's had a drop too much, already, to feel very energetic."

"Poor devil! . . . My noble son! . . . There's one thing, Betsey—does he know it, I wonder?—if he persuades his father to keep him, *I* won't, and that's flat! . . . Here, this won't do! My heart's jumping as it never did for Joris. Give me my cards."

The little shaped patience-table was brought out and fitted close up to Miss Altamont's outline. She laid out the cards with shaking hands, and presently she became intent and absorbed. Betsey watched her. . . . Her mother-in-law liked to talk while she played, and assume that the game was played mutually.

"This is the most difficult Patience there is, that I am trying, do you know, Betsey? . . . Yes. . . . I've got it. It's come off! . . . It doesn't come off once in a hundred times! Like the aloe!"

She swept up the cards.

"I couldn't bring it off again. Mustn't tempt Providence. I'll try an easier one this time! . . ."

She played on in silence. Her ear-rings drooped over the board. . . . Betsey watched, smiling kindly.

"Capital outlet this, Betsey! I confess I am a little upset by what you've told me, but I am not going to let it affect me. No, sir!"

"I'll go down and see if Wilfrid really is gone or not, shall I?"

"Do. Take care you don't let Ginger scratch you again!"

In a few moments her daughter-in-law returned, looking a shade paler.

"Well?" said Miss Altamont. "Is the gaol-bird flown?"

"I am afraid he has. And——"

" Don't tell me if it's anything disagreeable ! I wash my hands of him. Don't speak ! The game's the thing. I am very much interested in my game."

" You are a wonderful woman ! " said her daughter-in-law, who was trembling.

" I am. What have you got in your hand ? "

" It's Ada's letter. I found it in the drawer of Wilfrid's desk."

" Read it to me. Can you ? "

" Can't I ? I don't care."

She began in a dead voice :

" ' *I meant what I said to-night, Willie. This can't go on. I've just got about enough for the stamp for this——* ' "

" Extravagant minx ! "

" ' *Me, with my two children, will be turned out of this hole next week. I told you. Did you take it in ? Next week, and this is Sunday. Are you going to be able to give me anything to go on with and satisfy the landlord ? You can't. I believe you. Then all you can do is to go, as I told you, to the old man in Cavendish Square and see if you can't touch him for a bit. He's your own father and doesn't deny it, it seems. He can't be such a beast as you make out—'tisn't natural. Giving it all to your mother as he has, what good does it do me and the children ? There's no harm in asking. I'm asking. We're all asking, all of us, every day. He's used to it. Do you suppose you're the only son like that he's got—a man like him !* ' "

" That's a nasty one ! " observed Miss Altamont. " Go on, my dear ! "

" ' *Threaten him,* ' " read Betsey, roused now and suiting in some sort her action to the words. " ' *Say you're going to kill yourself. Be desperate. I am, I tell you. If you won't go to him, after this, I will. The children haven't enough to eat. Not—enough—to—eat ! Take that, you father that doesn't care for his children starving. Coward ! Little Katie said the other day, " I can't grow, because I'm not watered enough.*"

Where'd the child get it? But I knew what she meant. You go to your father, who's your father as you're hers, and tell him that. I'll not see you again, unless.—Ada.' There's her name to it. Did you ever?"

"Give me the letter!" bade Miss Altamont.

Betsey handed it to her, and she put it in the slight pocket of her silk apron.

"I am inclined to think I have had enough excitement for this time, my dear. If you stay in the room, we shall talk."

Her daughter-in-law left her.

IV

Betsey did not go to Miss Altamont again till one o'clock, when she took her her midday meal.

"Little Katie's preposterous speech, as reported, has given me quite a flutter!" the old woman remarked. "I shall really have to be careful of this rowdy species of emotions, or I shall be gone before you can turn round. That's the way it will probably be. It has set me thinking about my money. I have left it all to you, Betsey, child. Did you know that?"

"No. But Wilfrid was quite sure of it this morning."

"I have not told him. He argued from my feeling for you. He knows I'm fond of you, and he's jealous. What do you mean to do, Betsey, when I die?"

"Need we talk of it now? I will not stay with Wilfrid."

"But if I leave you my money, it is on the condition that you give my son a home."

"Then I must forfeit the money, dear."

"But what will you do instead?"

"Work."

"They all say that." She had a shrug of contempt.

"Some do it, too."

"Most do as I did." She looked up at her daughter-in-law inquiringly. "Do you blame me? I have never ascertained your views on that point."

"I thought it very clever of you."

"How so, bless you?"

"To manage to arrange the affairs of the heart on a business footing."

"I had no heart. I never grew one till I was fifty, and it jerked and asserted itself to-day because a little child was starving."

"I can't say I believe in that child. She got her speech out of some Board-school teacher's collection of *bon-mots*."

"So you think I need not flutter over that little joke!" said the old woman sarcastically. "Fluttering is fatal, we know. You mean well, Betsey, if not by the child, at any rate by me."

"Why don't you send Ada a cheque at once?" said the younger woman harshly. "If it would ease your mind? There's more joy in Heaven——! You know the quotation? Rather a mean one—I resent it. You want to support the sinner, I know, only you think I should object. You're wrong, dear, in that. I assure you, if the money's there, I don't care what wild, undeserving charity it goes to. Write the cheque, and I'll post it for you with pleasure. I have no fine feelings about Wilfrid's *faux ménage* now. I haven't either taste or feelings left. I am rapidly becoming a mere suburban derelict."

"What, under Heaven, is that? Surely you exaggerate?"

"I can hardly describe it, except in exaggerated terms." She laughed and sat down on the low prie-dieu chair. She wanted to divert the old woman's mind from serious subjects, and knew very well how to do it. She had a pleasing gurgle in her throat as she talked and laughed, as if her own long words appalled her and her own wit amused her. "It's the way I feel it—the way my environment affects me. It is as if the iron of inanition had slowly entered my soul. I am resigned, submissive, I am beginning to comply with my misery. I go to their teas, though not to their concerts—not that cup!—I belong to their magazine clubs and debating societies. Talk of the subliminal mind, it's not nearly so deep down, or so stupidly mysterious, as the suburban consciousness!"

"You are not quite so resigned as you make out. But go on, you amuse me."

"Is it taking off some of the flutter? Good! . . . Well, dear, I don't say I am quite dead and atrophied—None of us are, worse luck! We brood, we long, we swither. We have glimmerings—of worlds not realised. Like the rest of us, I study the movements of the Free Peoples from the pink papers, and read of crimes I may not commit, and clothes I may not wear. We are all waking up a little. I believe it's Wellington's that has done it? We're a horde of savages in connection with a circulating library. Subsidised men of the Press expound for us the primitive elemental passions——"

"If you knew them, those passions you speak of, knew them intimately, as I have done—you'd know they were mere matters of routine—of business, my dear . . . not worth a quiet afternoon with a book!"

"Perhaps! Satiety might creep in. But we haven't had much chance of trying them, you see. We are seething with revolt. Mrs. Gedge has told her husband that it's quite on the cards he may come back from his office one day and find her flown *à la Nora*—poor exploded, old Ibsenitish Nora! Shows how behindhand we are! The new Nora doesn't fly—she stays and sows her wild oats at home. Miss Zambach has read 'Between the Shafts,' and is thinking of the best way to keep her nephews at home in the evenings; and Evangeline Simmons takes long bicycle rides to wear down her temperament. I like to see you laughing, dear. Now shall I get you out your cheque-book, and you can spend a happy couple of hours with it while I go out?"

"Where are you going?"

"It's Mrs. Wormeley's 'At Home' day. I didn't go last Monday."

"So you can stand Mrs. W.?"

"She's all there is. I have to take my mental food where I can get it," the other replied bitterly. "These women of

Wimbledon, with husbands dotted about in every office in London, are rather entertaining in the lump, and for what they represent. Mrs. Wormeley always reminds me of a fat white slug, crawling across the garden path after a shower of rain, lifting its silly transparent horns to see what is going on. She's over-fed, over-housed, over-dressed—under-servanted, under-weighted with intellect——"

"You're so much cleverer than they are, Betsey, I just wonder they tolerate you. . . . Well, come to me again when you've got your hat on, and don't mention the cheque-book until I do. I will not be jumped into benevolence!"

Betsey obeyed. She wondered, as she stuck pins into her hat, and peeped at herself, stooping, in the low glass that came no further than her waist, whether Miss Altamont would go the cynical length of asking her to post a letter containing the means of running her husband's illegitimate *ménage* for a month longer. But indeed, if this surprising duty were demanded of her, Betsey meant to show no temper. It would be a merely conventional manifestation of that vice, if she did, for she did not feel at all strongly about it. A little natural pique had succeeded her access of real vexation this morning, when Wilfrid had broken the fact of his paternity to her. She was moved now by purely business considerations. In the first place, she did not believe in the genuineness of the appeal of Wilfrid's mistress; she thought the letter too theatrical to be sincere. In the second, she fancied that the state of Miss Altamont's exchequer did not justify an immediate outlay, supposing the generous impulse were still predominant when that lady came to examine her pass-book.

It was not. When Betsey returned to the invalid no mention was made of the intended charity. Miss Altamont was concerned, however, quite unusually, about Wilfrid's comfort.

"Is there a fire in my son's study?" she asked.

"No. But there can be. I'll tell Georgie to light it."

"Do so. I may be hard-hearted and able to resist charitable appeals, but I have a troubling vision of the poor fool I bore wandering about the streets trying to make up his mind to go and get refused admittance in Cavendish Square! It is most unlikely that Sir Joris will allow himself to be approached. There is no reason why he should. It would be a mere indecent attempt at blackmail, and Sir Joris knows how to deal with such cases."

"But I have heard—every one knows—that Sir Joris Veere is a great philanthropist—gives away hundreds every day, and feeds crowds of poor children in Shoreditch and Stepney!"

"He will perhaps benefit his grandchildren in the lump, then, and be instrumental in giving them a sixpenny tea at Christmas——"

"So charity will really begin at home for once—eh?"

"Ha! ha! . . . Well, be civil to Wilfrid, if you find him when you come back."

"Yes, I'll wash my cut and hold out the other hand to him," said Betsey shortly. "Milder counsels shall prevail. You may rely on me. I'll not be gone long. Good-bye!"

She went out of the room jauntily, though something, she knew not what, seemed to rise in her throat and choke her as she went downstairs. She took mechanically a box of matches from a shelf in the hall, and, entering her husband's study, struck one after the other in the vain attempt to get a light. She was clumsy, ineffectual, a sense of guiltiness oppressed her. Yet Miss Altamont had not scolded her; her solicitude for Wilfrid held only a mild note of reproach for the healthy woman who had irritated the nervous man belonging to them both.

Wilfrid had struck her! But what was a blow compared with the lash of words that she wielded so well?

She knelt on the worn hearthrug and stoked Wilfrid's fire, carefully, eagerly, artistically. It was badly laid, and did

not burn—at first. She then sat down, her arms under her knees, and watched the feeble progress of the flame. As it slowly gained strength she felt a distinct sense of elation. She had at last done something wifely for Wilfrid. She made up her mind not to leave the fire till its future was assured. . . .

It was nearly four o'clock. She fell into a reverie. Her arms relaxed, her gloves fell out of her lap. Thoughts of all kinds, underlaid with a permanent basic mournfulness, passed through her mind. She wished she could shake off her dreary mood of self-condemnation. She wished Georgiana would come in and get scolded for laying the fire so badly. . . .

The fine heat caressed her cheek. The fire was getting on well. There was no need for Georgiana. She would hunt out a pair of Wilfrid's slippers in the inner room, put them not too near the fire, and go out to distract herself, as usual, by the languid exercise of her finer wits on the clumsy mental apparatus of her acquaintance. Sitting in their horrid be-photographed stuffy drawing-rooms with a cup of tea in her hands, she would smilingly " prod them up," show them their own views, which she more or less shared, exaggerated to ridicule, tease them, agitate them, amuse them. She was not loved, but she was judged worth her salt—at any rate her tea, by the stultified wives and sisters of the business men who flocked out of the suburb every day by the morning train to seek the cheerful arena of combat, leaving their females at home to chew the cud of sweet and bitter fancy. Betsey had quite a little reputation in Wimbledon, where her talk counted for much, and her beauty, naturally enough, not at all.

V

Mrs. Mortimer Wormeley. At Home, Fridays. Four to six-thirty," was on her cards, and was an institution. The housemaid cleaned the silver on Friday mornings; the spare seat that would hold three nicely was brought into the drawing-room from the hall, a ninepenny pot-plant was bought, it was clean-cushion day, and the club magazines all had paper-knives negligently stuck through them.

Crump, the baker in the High Street, provided the one-and-sixpenny Madeira cake and the coffee rolls. Every member of the set who passed Crump's window knew his famous make, and could account to a certainty for each slice of the cake that would be sent up to The Pines in good time on the afternoon of the important day. Mrs. Wormeley's friends had got into the way of attending alternate Fridays, so that a computation of attendances would put you in a position to know exactly what members of the set would share the cake with you on any given Friday.

You were not, as it is confidently believed within the Pale, invited to " bring your sewing." No one really does sew in the suburbs. If Mrs. Altamont put needle to thread it was of sheer necessity. The bitter cry of the riven seam or the sprung button only could impel her, and she used the bored, perfunctory stitch of a Robinson Crusoe whose furs have to be held together. Nobody's clothes, as a matter of fact, needed careful mending, for they were as a rule bought cheap, and thrown away as soon as they " went wrong."

Mrs. Altamont could trim a hat, and often did. She used pins.

To-day, after closing the door of Worksop House with a snap, she directed her steps towards Wimbledon, and walked along the frontage of the few best shops in a ruminating manner. She gazed carelessly, but shrewdly, into their glazen depths. . . .

She had a black feather laid by.

One of those blue soft felt hats, tilted a little on one side, and with a knowing tweak taken in the crown, would use it up very well. This was how she managed to dress beautifully if a little casually, for almost nothing, worshipping at the shrine of the goddess of the pin-makers.

She entered the shop, picked out her hat, paid ready money for it, and carried it away with her in a paper bag.

She passed the railway station and began to scale the slopes of villadom on the west. She went by Magnolia Lodge, and The Beeches, and Oakwood, all so much alike that they might, she thought, as well have been styled comprehensively, The Peas. Finally she came to The Pines—one pine, and so dusty !—a grey stuccoed house standing in its own scanty grounds. In their circumference two flower-beds and one drive had been engineered. Here Mrs. Wormeley held the jousts.

Footsteps on the moist gravel of the path told her that the At Home had begun. She rang the bell that said Visitors, and was at once admitted by Selina the maid. She deposited her parcel on the hall table. This was deftly combined with a coat-rack. She concealed the inelegant suggestiveness of the paper bag under the flaps of Mr. Wormeley's great-coat. The impedimenta of Mr. Wormeley's Sunday employment and enjoyment were *en evidence*, and she sighed, wishing that Wilfrid could be induced to take to the great derivative of clerks and business men. In the other corner Master Albany's perambulator presented unexpected snags. On one of these

she caught the braid on the bottom of her gown, previously anchored there by fairy stitches.

"Oh, bother! Lend me a pin, Selina, will you?"

Selina kindly took the familiar implement out of the bib of her clean apron. "I'm sorry, I only seem to have one, ma'am."

"Oh, one'll do," answered Mrs. Altamont, hastily adjusting it. "Who's here?"

"Miss Zambach and Mrs. Gedge."

Profound and sinister yells from above-stairs punctuated the names.

"Oh, dear, there's Master Albany off again!" exclaimed Selina. "Whatever have come to that child? He do scream so. Anybody'd think we was half murdering of him!"

"They'll know you aren't doing it by giving him soothing syrup, any way," said Mrs. Altamont vindictively, passing into the drawing-room. "I'd give it him if he were mine, little wretch!"

Mrs. Wormeley sat in a cosy corner formed by the Chesterfield sofa. It had a shoulder that let down, making room for one person beside her. That person got a clear view of Mrs. Wormeley's mystery of tea-making—of tea-watering, for the nodus of strength was put in outside, to be diluted to taste through the afternoon. On her left hand stood a rickety three-decker cake-stand, bread and butter, rolled, on the top layer, the famous Madeira from Crump's on the intermediate one, and the hot cakes, which were the heaviest, on the lowest dish of all. Byngo, Mrs. Wormeley's terrier, who had generally been freshly washed, glared at the assemblage of good things. Mrs. Altamont's eye caught Byngo's indubitably, and Byngo at once knew that she would be accessory to some portions of the tea-cake finding their way into his mouth during the course of the afternoon. He didn't mind it being heavy.

Mrs. Wormeley was stout and fair, with ear-rings that

somehow gave her a sort of respectable Stuart air. Her grey hair was waved and in *rouleaux*, and she wore a jewelled inset watch on her broad bosom as if it were a medal. Her voice was low and yearning. She shook hands cordially with Mrs. Altamont, and called her by her Christian name.

"Albany *is* letting himself go!" Betsey remarked as she shook hands with the other two ladies.

"He doesn't seem to get on with his new nurse. She has a moustache, but is otherwise quite nice," the mother explained, and the two other ladies pursed their lips slightly. Mrs. Wormeley was not clever with servants, and even Selina's demure little cat-face that they had all grown to like in her two months' occupancy of The Pines, would probably not illumine those halls for as long again. Mrs. Altamont was being installed next to Mrs. Wormeley—the place reserved to the latest comer. . . .

"But shan't you have to go to him?" inquired the childless woman wistfully.

"He's only exercising his lungs, so Dr. Gedge tells me," replied Mrs. Wormeley indifferently. "Bread and butter, or tea-cake, Betsey?" Crump's cake was offered with the second cup only. "Down, Byngo! Is not that a ring at the bell?"

"It's Evangeline Simmons, I expect," said Miss Zambach. "Do you know if she's heard from Drake's about her novel?"

"Oh, yes—didn't you know? He's wild to publish it, and she's going to let him. She's got to put down eighty-five pounds as a guarantee, and won't get a penny till two thousand copies have been sold. He says they'll easily do five thousand, and she's to give him her next two if it's a success. Isn't that nice?"

"Very," said Mrs. Gedge. "Poor girl, I do hope it *will* be a success. They *are* so badly off!"

"It's sure to pay if she makes it improper enough," said Betsey gaily.

"But not too improper," said Miss Zambach, "for if it is too *au de là*, my dear, Wellington's won't have it on his shelves, and I shouldn't be able to afford to buy it."

"Evangeline must curb herself and manage to keep to the windward of Wellington's," said Betsey. "Cleverer people than she have had to. It's a necessary condition of literary existence now. What——?"

The door opened suddenly, and the maid Selina appeared, propelled evidently by some force from behind, and commendably anxious to keep command of the door.

"Please, Mrs. Wormeley, it's a lady. She says she's heard Master Albany all down the road, and——"

"Excuse me," said a somewhat raucous but perfectly well-bred voice from behind Selina, "I am a member of The Society, and I feel I must make some inquiries."

The young lady who, cuckoo-like, shoved the little linnet of a Selina out of the way, was tall and stately, and did not look more than twenty years old. She was pretty in a simple, innocent way, and her long ear-rings accentuated the childishness of her face. A single pearl on a loop of diamonds hung from under her chin, lengthening her long throat. The four suburban women were at once duly impressed by the style and grooming of the impertinent visitor. Mrs. Wormeley rose and scattered the biscuits, and Byngo hastily profited.

"There must be something wrong," pursued the girl, with an effort, evidently, toning down her natural arrogance. "A child in mortal terror running naked down the street——"

"My son Albany——" stammered Mrs. Wormeley.

"Is it your son?"

"Yes, and my son hasn't been out to-day. I never heard such—impertinence. Coming into another person's house! If my husband were here——"

"Mr. Wormeley would know what to say to you!" exclaimed Miss Zambach, coming forward with a spirit.

"Really!" murmured Mrs. Gedge, apologetically still under the sway of the style and the pearl drop.

The young lady stood firm. She was evidently unused to be contradicted. Mrs. Altamont contributed to the conversation for the first time. Gently, indifferently, she spoke.

"Why don't you let the young lady look at Albany and see for herself, Madge? Perhaps she will be able to tell us how to stop him screaming."

The suggestion hung fire for a moment. . . .

"I'm sure I wouldn't do anything of the kind," murmured Miss Zambach, but Mrs. Wormeley, hypnotised by the pearl drop, had already turned, and was leading her visitor to the upstairs regions, whence the screams still came fast.

Miss Zambach stooped and picked up the biscuits, restoring those that were least defaced to the dish. "I suppose you'll expect Madge to offer her a cup of tea when she comes down again, Betsey?" she asked sarcastically.

"Why not? I should. But Madge won't rise to it. Here, Byngo!" She offered the dog tea-cake. "I say, I shouldn't be surprised if the mannish nurse gave warning on the spot."

The others considered Betsey spiteful, and were about to tell her so when the door opened, and Selina admitted a tall weedy girl in rusty tweeds, who was told at once what was going on upstairs.

"Oh, Betsey, you're killing!" exclaimed Evangeline Simmons, the future beguiler of Messrs. Wellington, for it was she.

"Why not? It was the simplest thing to do. She's only a child. She meant well."

"Coming here spying——!"

"Well, who minds being spied on? The sooner people get rid of that silly notion about an Englishman's house being his castle the better. Privacy is only our desire for differen-

tiation while the world is so vile. We don't trust our fellow-citizens to be nice. We pay to go first-class because we dread the old lady who offers peppermints in the third. We are ashamed of ourselves in our every attitude. But, bless you, in the time that's coming people won't be shy of each other, won't mind going on platforms, or singing at concerts, or eating in public, and giving themselves away generally. They won't care to blush unseen——"

"If they blush at all!" said Mrs. Gedge severely. "People like you, Betsey, with a perfect craze for publicity—notoriety, I may say——"

"I adore it. And I'll never get it. Suburban seclusion for ever—ochone! ochone!" Mrs. Altamont chanted softly. "I should love to be the heroine of a *cause célèbre*. Sh'h! I hear voices."

"Somebody, do, set the door ajar!" said Mrs. Gedge.

The little thin hall buzzed with apologies. Then the listeners heard the hall door closed deferentially, and Mrs. Wormeley, brimming with consequence, re-entered her own drawing-room.

"She wouldn't stay tea, Betsey, though I asked her. Said she was engaged to tea at Garsington House."

"Old Lord Druid's!" said Mrs. Gedge. "My husband attends him."

"A thoroughly nice girl!" continued Mrs. Wormeley. "I talked to her and explained things. She agreed with me that Albany is a purely modern product, the over-sensitised offspring of two highly-strung personalities—Mortimer and myself."

"Born and bred beyond the radius," said Betsey, delicately mocking. "Born to soul-searching as the sparks fly upwards, —to a morbid outlook, like the rest of us. Far away from the central radiance—the hub of the universe, Mayfair——"

"I can't say I care about Mayfair so much," said Miss Zambach. "But I could do with Kensington. Bernard

Shaw speaks at the Town Hall there sometimes. But here, with nothing to do but go and try to get the books we want from Wellington's——"

"Wellington's has done it!" said Betsey. "He is responsible for our divine discontent. Until we could, for the humble sum of twopence a volume, procure the literature of our destitution, and learn all about ourselves and our unruly organs, and the world's cruel measures of repression, we bore it better, we could buoy ourselves up with the idea that we were healthy happy outsiders, living the right life, though dreary. But now we know that we are all wrong, all clogged up, arrested growths, unfit for treasons, crimes, and stratagems, out of it all, out of Life where virtues and vice flourish together. . . . I can go on if you like?"

"I agree with Betsey," said Miss Simmons. "Ten years ago—I am, alas, old enough to remember it" (she was the youngest there!)—"we were contented in our blind suburbanity. We dressed out of Mrs. Wellwood's shilling patterns, we shopped and argued with tradesmen about things that really didn't matter, we never thought of asking our husbands —I haven't got one, but I know—our husbands what they did all day long when ostensibly at the mart, we never looked beyond the big catalpa tree in the garden, as we sat and hemmed blinds. But now, thanks to Wellington's and some dear darling revealing authors he hasn't got on to boycotting yet, we are seething with discontent, instinct with revolt——"

"And all owing, Betsey says, to the flood of literature let loose on us by the libraries," pondered Mrs. Gedge. "I sometimes wonder if it's wise. Is it any good for us to know that we are as capable of high emotion as——"

"Oh, well, Wellington's seems to have got a fright lately," broke in Mrs. Wormeley. "He is trying to pen us in again. There were two or three books I read reviews of last summer in the magazines and so on, and when I asked for them the girl told me the management had boycotted them."

"Too bad!" said Miss Zambach. "Treating us like children!"

"That's why I have joined the Suffrage movement," exclaimed Evangeline. "And Socialism too. There's one morality for the rich and another for the poor. It's the *poor* intelligent who suffer. Untrained rich idiots who can afford to buy a book right out can read what they like."

"Plank down a voluptuous four-and-six, and you can take your favourite drug home with you," suggested Mrs. Altamont.

"There's Lee-Brice's new book, now," Evangeline sighed. "I am dying to get it; I am sure it would appeal to me."

"It wouldn't appal *you*, at any rate!" put in Betsey.

"*The Red Corpuscles*," said Miss Zambach. "But they never will have his books, so it's no good."

"But what does the title mean?" asked Mrs. Wormeley.

"Oh, I suppose it's the vigour—the amount of life force in us," explained Evangeline. "The red corpuscles in the blood and what they drive us to do. That's the way I read the title."

"Splendid crimes, eh?" said Betsey. "Though I should think the average murderer was a person of low vitality—of a sluggish imagination, if not an anæmic one. He takes such very short views—never sees the gallows at the end of his line."

"I didn't mean murder crimes exactly. Crimes with a love motive, more. What they call *crimes passionels*."

"Not many of them in England, at least. There's money at the bottom of every murder, I think," said Betsey briskly. "No, my dear Evangeline, make up your mind, there's no hope for you here, so be quick and marry out of mediocrity. Get into Mayfair, or at least Kensington. I'm going now. Are you coming my way? We might call in at Wellington's and see if we can get *The Red Corpuscles*. I don't see how they *can* go on boycotting a reputation like Lee-Brice."

"I bet they do, though! Their regular people complain

and say they can't send their daughters to grub in their shelves as they like."

"Who wants girls to get out the books they like? Lee-Brice doesn't write for girls. If he did, Evangeline wouldn't care to read him. Come on, my dear, I hope you don't mind being seen with a paper parcel?"

The two went out together.

. . . . . .

"Betsey's splendid, isn't she?" said Mrs. Wormeley, rather apologetically. "She's got so much decision of character. When she told me to take that girl upstairs I just had to obey her. And as it turned out, I was glad I had done so. Such a ladylike person, and a friend of Lord Druid's too."

"He's a dipsomaniac," said Mrs. Gedge parenthetically. She had a great pull, physiologically speaking, in these discussions, being a doctor's wife.

"But a man of good family before a dipsomaniac," said Mrs. Wormeley. "That husband of Betsey's, now!—he drinks and nothing to redeem it."

"Poor Betsey!" said Miss Zambach.

"There's no harm in Mr. Altamont," Mrs. Gedge assured them. "Not vicious, only weak. My husband calls him a first-class degenerate."

"Oh, I should have thought that would have expressed Lord Druid more!" said Mrs. Wormeley.

"Mr. Altamont's illegitimacy preys on his mind rather, I imagine," volunteered Mrs. Gedge.

"More than it does on his mother's," Miss Zambach remarked skittishly.

"I do believe Betsey admires her for that," Mrs. Gedge contributed. "She nearly says it. She thinks her so strong."

"Well," remarked the hostess, "it does take some strength of mind to defy public opinion as that old woman does and call yourself miss when you're the mother of a grown-up son!

Mr. Wormeley has never been quite reconciled to my calling there. I only did it once to put matters on a footing. And now Betsey is glad to come here, pretty often. She's so amusing. But I'd rather have her here than go there. There's something sinister about that old lady. She just stares me down. And the house is a most uncomfortable and ill-regulated house. It speaks for them both. Betsey's not a bit a natty person. She doesn't seem to care to have things pretty about her. Not a chair-back in the house, and no photographs ! "

" Perhaps she's got no friends to send her them ? And no money to be done herself," said Miss Zambach, fixing her eyes on the large cabinet-sized presentment of Mrs. Wormeley, in her court dress with a shimmering lake of train in front of her feet, in which she appeared just about to plunge. " And she certainly wasn't presented on *her* marriage ! "

" No ! " sighed Mrs. Wormeley sympathetically. " Dear me, how I have let myself drop out of things ! This that I have on," she indicated the dark satin dress that draped her, " was made out of the train, dyed ! "

VI

"Gracious! How my corns are shooting!" said Evangeline Simmons, as in the company of the woman she loved with a fearful love, and admired against her own and her parents' will, she made her painful way down the little "parlour drive" of The Pines. "And just look at the berries! It's going to be a hard winter. And we shall have those wretched unemployed about again, with their six children and one wife starving at home!"

The careless speech reminded Mrs. Altamont of the plight of little Katie. But she proceeded to answer Evangeline categorically.

"Get something for them at Wellington's—the corns, I mean. They had a wonderful cure for them there, my Georgie told me, last winter. And do hold up your long-trained tweeds, Evangeline! You're covering me with mud. I wish there were sumptuary laws, and that no one in our position was permitted to wear trains. Did you notice that girl who came in about Albany, and what short skirts *she* had?"

"Ah—but she was tall and slight. Lucky for her. Do you think she was a hospital nurse? Or a Suffragette?"

"Neither. She left her card case in the hall. Madge will have to send it back. I looked in it while you were hunting for your umbrella. She was the Lady Dobrée de Saye."

"Good gracious! . . . But I don't care for titles, do you?"

"Yes, I do, rather," replied Mrs. Altamont frankly. "They sound so clean and clear—not tradey or suburban. I knew

she was somebody decent the moment she came in—some smart crank, or so."

"And that's why you advised Madge to take her upstairs?"

"Partly. Just to see if anything came of it."

"Nothing did."

"Madge didn't rise to the occasion, you see."

"Now you——"

"Oh, I'd have got hold of her somehow. Without pushing or vulgarity, mind, Evangeline. I hope I've got enough *savoir-faire* for that. She and I'd have caught on. It would have been a door opened on to the world—for me. I'd have liked that, of course, but——" Her face saddened. "It could not have lasted. Her people would have interfered—my circumstances, naturally!"

"You look so sad, Betsey, all of a sudden!"

"—As if the idea had just been brought home to me, eh? When as a matter of fact I live looking at it, day by day, facing a blank wall that cuts me off from every possible experience. If it wasn't for my—for Miss Altamont, I think I'd go mad!"

"I didn't know, although I've immense power of sympathy, that you felt it all as much as that! You're always so gay and laughing!"

"That's my temperament," the other retorted, laughing. "So I get no pity. Here we are at Wellington's. Hey for *The Red Corpuscles!*"

"And hey for the corn-cure!" echoed Evangeline, with imitative cheerfulness. She admired Betsey enormously in her pose of mirthful Mariana of a Wimbledon grange.

They entered the funnel-shaped emporium of Messrs. Wellington's. A long counter devoted to physical amelioration led on to that consecrated to mental panacea. Evangeline stopped at the first, and tried to attract the attention of a busy salesman.

"I'll go on to the library and join you again," said Mrs. Altamont. "They are so perfectly sure not to have the book!"

But before she could get any further the light of the door was filled up and a burly man dashed into the shop, anxious, seemingly, not so much to buy a drug to allay pain, as to be the first to impart news to a friend at the counter. The clerk whose duty it was to attend to Evangeline leaned towards the new-comer, who, however, spoke loud, and Betsey and Evangeline caught snatches of his terrific piece of information:

"Old man . . . shot in two places . . . head . . . his own secretary . . . turned the weapon on himself . . . only blown out his jaw and one eye, poor devil!" . . .

"Good Heavens, you don't say so! One-and-elevenpence-halfpenny, miss," said the punctilious clerk, turning politely to Evangeline, anxious, perhaps, to show that firmly ingrained business habits could stand the impact of even news like this without pretermission of the work in hand. Then, and not till then, he stooped to the informant for more.

"Oh, Betsey," pleaded Miss Simmons, fumbling with her bag; "do lend me sixpence!"

Betsey held out her leathern purse, and Evangeline gratefully prized out the money.

"Who has been killed, do you say?" Betsey asked, turning to the new-comer quietly. The clerk had gone for change, and the burly man was the centre of an eager group. He looked in the direction of and answered Betsey's neat voice, however.

"Old Sir Joris Veere. Veere, Avercamp, and Veere. He's dead as a door-nail by now. Fell like a steer, so the man said who saw it. And he says it's all about a girl, too. Here, I must be off!"

He departed, anxious to be delightfully beforehand with the newspapers in some more quarters. Evangeline, having

got her change, turned to Betsey, who stood dumbfounded. The crowd melted away.

"We'd better go, I suppose. What about *The Red Corpuscles?* Did you ask?"

"I haven't been in there——" She seemed dazed.

"I forgot," said Evangeline. "Sir Joris Veere—it makes a difference to you?"

"For goodness' sake, don't talk about it here!" said Betsey impatiently. "There's the bus—passes our door! Good-bye!"

She caught her bus, without calling upon it to stop. It was running full tilt. Evangeline saw her resolute, impenetrable face fronting the window as she was borne past.

VII

Betsey declared that she never could think about anything but clothes in a bus. She could not even think of clothes now, so her mind was a conscious blank during the ten minutes' drive. She alighted in front of her own door, said good night to the conductor, who knew her well, and admired and respected her lightning entries on to the footboard of his bus, and rang the bell. Wilfrid, of course, carried the only latch-key.

Even then she did not think. The essential notion that filled all her brain place was evidenced in the first thing she said to her maid who, smiling imperturbably, opened the door.

"Miss Altamont—no one is to go near her—not even Mr. Altamont—he's not come in, has he?" She was breathless. Georgie was calm.

"No, mum. There's a gentleman waiting for you, mum."

Mrs. Altamont's hand went to her forehead. . . .

"Where've you put him?"

"In the dining-room, mum. There's a bit of fire still in there."

"That's right!" She handed her the paper bag with the blue felt hat in it. "Here, take this!"

"I think it's the Gas!" volunteered Georgie.

"Very likely," said her mistress, standing in front of a little mirror in the hall, and poking at a strayed lock on her forehead with a hair-pin. . . . To gain time! For what? She wondered. . . . "Bring a lamp as soon as you can. I'm going in to him now."

She entered the dining-room, going down the one step, over which she boggled, though she was perfectly used to it. She was nervous lest it should not be " the Gas."

A stiff, correct, spruce person, who had been sitting with his hands on his knees in the semi-obscurity, his bulk irradiated from below by the nearly extinct fire, rose at her entry.

" I'm so sorry—she hasn't given you a light ! " Her affectation of bustle was unbecoming to her. " Have you been waiting long ? "

" It doesn't matter," the man interrupted. He fostered a singular calm round him, as he spoke, neither fast nor slow, with the curious, civil inwardness of the British official. " Excuse me, madam—you are Mrs. Altamont ? "

She acquiesced, timorously—a mouse that sees the trap it will shortly run into.

" I have a message for you—from a man in hospital."

" Mr. Altamont ? " She had always known it, she realised, now.

" Yes. He's badly hurt, but not dead. He shot Sir Joris Veere at his residence in Cavendish Square, at twenty minutes past four this afternoon, and then tried to take his own life."

He made a movement forward to support the woman who did not totter. Her face he could see but ill in the dimness.

" Had you heard ? "

" I heard in a shop near here, that there had been a murder, but not that Wilfrid—— They said something about a secretary. . . . Put it down, Georgie, and go ! " She spoke peremptorily. " Remember what I told you about Miss Altamont."

" Yes, m'm ! " Georgie deposited a hastily lit, still evilly smelling lamp on the centre table and fled. The detective continued :

" The police were called in by Mr. Ernest Rose Veere, his nephew, who heard the shots in the hall, but was not in time

to prevent it. They found both men on the floor. Sir Joris was stone dead, your husband unable to speak. We took him to St. Frithiof's close by. He was made to write on a slate. And a card was found in his pocket with the address. The coroner sent me here to fetch you."

"What did Wilfrid write on the slate?" she asked, melting.

"Only one name—Ada. Your name, I presume?"

"No. Mine is Elizabeth. I will give you Ada's address—Mrs. Cox, twenty-one Burckardt's Grove, Lordship Lane, Camberwell."

Her colour had risen. All through the interview she had never really lost it. Inspector Whortleberry, as he gravely noted the address she gave him, scented something painful, some squalid unpleasant family circumstance such as it often, in the exercise of his profession, fell to his lot to discover.

"Do I understand, madam, that you prefer not to come to your husband?"

"Don't blame me!" she replied. "I was not sent for. Mrs. Cox will go. We should clash."

"He may not live through the night."

She resented his insistence, and retorted violently:

"All the better! Then he will escape being tried for murder—murder of his own father!"

This was news to Inspector Whortleberry, but he did not betray it. He allowed the woman, who was evidently becoming a little hysterical, to run on.

"It would simply kill his mother, this! She must not know."

"His mother?"

"Yes, his poor mother! She is an old lady, and she's an invalid, and she's in this house, and it's no use your asking to see her, for I should not allow it! You want her help to convict him, I know, but it's no good."

"The conviction is sure, madam. There is no question of that. But we should be glad of any document—a letter or

anything of that kind, that would assist us in establishing motive."

"There's a letter in his pocket now that would do that. Oh, no, it's here. I forgot. If you'll promise me to make no attempt to go near her, I'll undertake to get it for you."

"I would not disturb the old lady for the world, madam," the detective assured her correctly; "but if you'll get us the letter you speak of, we shall be very much obliged."

"You won't follow me upstairs—or anything?"

"On no account. I give you my word."

She smiled at him, a smile whose unnecessary sweetness, with its underlying bitterness, had no particular significance for him, except as an assurance of goodwill and a sign that she meant to be sensible. He had not studied the early Italian Masters, and the face of Monna Lisa. The wife of Altamont left the room, and Inspector Whortleberry remained standing, dutiful, patient, *routinier* as usual, without curiosity, imagination, or perspicacity.

Betsey walked upstairs very quietly and into Miss Altamont's room. That lady sat reading the works of Froude; the cards were pushed aside to make room for her book on the green baize table.

"Who's here?" she said. "That wretched Georgie came and took away one of my lamps!"

"The gas man. There's a stoppage, he thinks, in the pipe—our pipe, I am afraid—under the front door, where it goes into the main. The company'll do it, and charge us cost price, unless we prefer to give the job to our own man."

"Let *them* do it, certainly—cheaper," said Miss Altamont. "What is it you want that you are standing over me like that?"

"I want Ada's letter, please."

"What for?"

"To read over again. It's been bothering me."

"And me too. Take it. I do wish there was some way

without utterly pauperising them, of sending them a little to go on with."

"I'll think about it," said Betsey. "Suppose we do without gas?"

She whipped the letter out of the apron pocket, and departed.

"This paper," said Mr. Whortleberry, tapping the pocket-book in which he had deposited it, "I will keep safely, and talk to you about it to-morrow, when we meet in the court."

"Oh, have I got to go anywhere public? Have I got to be mixed up in it?"

"You are his wife, madam. Twenty-four hours after—it's the rule. The inquest will probably be held in Cavendish Square, where the body lies."

Betsey's fair face contracted with sudden, real horror. An old grey-haired man lying dead! His head dabbled in blood! The inspector pitied her. She was very, glaringly, lovely, and her colour was like a rose.

"Perhaps, after all, you will not be needed. The secretary was in an inner room and heard it all. And young Mr. Veere, Sir Joris's nephew, was in the hall and heard their voices, and the shots. He rang the bell and rushed to his uncle. He just got there in time to see Altamont turn the weapon upon himself. But the Coroner's Court—I am afraid you will be bound to appear there! I will let you know. I will come and fetch you, if you like?"

"No, thank you," said Mrs. Altamont, who had regained all her composure. "I must think of Miss Altamont. She's the point. I have already had to tell her some lies about your presence here. Very few people come to this house, and she always contrives to get wind of them somehow. Deadly curious she is, like all old people. So I'll come alone, and then she will be able to think I have gone out shopping. Wilfrid shall not have the satisfaction of killing his mother as well as his father!"

She opened the door and let him out into the street, her kind smile of adieu and sidelong glance came almost mechanically.

The officer noted it, though not in a book.

Then the wife of Altamont shut the door. All life buzzed round her, she had been violently flung into the arena of the passions, she lived at last! The tall clock on the stairhead struck six.

VIII

Dinner! Common, everyday dinner!

Miss Altamont must dine; Mrs. Altamont must appear to dine. Georgie, apparently, knew nothing. But her mistress did not trust her. Servants always knew everything. And if she did not know she ought to be told, so as to ensure her co-operation in the task of keeping the old lady ignorant. But Betsey shrank from opening up the subject, the first words spoken, like the first shots in an engagement, would let loose the pent-up horror, and break through her crust of calm.

To-morrow it would be all over, in the papers, in Georgie's own special "horror" journal—she would wait. . . .

"Mr. Altamont is not likely to be home to-night," she hazarded, as she stirred a little mixture over the kitchen fire.

"No, mum."

"And, Georgie, do you want to go out this evening?"

"Not particular, mum."

"Then you would oblige me very much by staying at home."

A useless precaution, after all, so she thought, the minute she had spoken, for the postman—a dozen persons would probably come to the door, and inform Georgie. Why shouldn't Georgie know? She ought to know! She would know to-morrow morning. So her unquiet thoughts circled on themselves as she stirred aimlessly, clumsily, spattering the frothy white spume on the iron plate of the stove.

"Take care, mum, it's just a-going to boil over!" screamed Georgie. "Mum, what's the matter?"

"Don't you see?" said Mrs. Altamont portentously, pointing to the flakes of white that lay, billowing into roundness, and slowly frizzling at their edges, splayed out on the black iron.

"It won't matter, I can soon wipe it up."

"No, it won't matter: you can wipe it up; it's blood."

"It's milk, mum—whatever have come to you?" said Georgie, calmly leaving the fried milk to form a rusty blob on the stove. She took matters out of her mistress's hands, and set to work to prepare the bread-sauce herself, while the latter stood and stared at the hideous patch, now diminishing and rapidly turning brown. She no longer saw it red; the accompanying vision of the study in Cavendish Square and the clotted, spattered carpet there, had faded too, leaving a horror of Wilfrid's disgusting, squalid act that could never be overcome. She allowed Georgie to snatch the tray from her shaking hands, and carry it for her to the foot of the stairs. Georgie knew, decidedly she knew, that there was something wrong. No harm in Georgie! . . .

"Let me take it for you, mum, do, as far as the door."

Mrs. Altamont made no resistance but followed the little kind "general" upstairs. There, Georgie whispered, delivering over the tray to her mistress's hands:

"I don't suppose, mum, you feel like the cold meat this evening. Just let me toss you up an omelick!"

Mrs. Altamont laughed thinly. Georgie "toss" anything!

"Very well, Georgie. For supper, say? When I have got Miss Altamont to bed! I daresay I shall be quite hungry!"

Miss Altamont raised her head. Her daughter-in-law entered the room, with the sensations of an actress entering on the scene, but with none of the dash and vigour that pertains to egotistical entry, and the old woman noticed it.

"How leaden-footed you are, Betsey, to-night! Has Wilfrid come back yet?"

"No. He sent a telegram to say we are not to expect him."

"My lord is unusually considerate! Dated from where?"

"Camberwell post office," said Betsey, with a jerk.

Miss Altamont's face grew grimmer. She looked away, down at Betsey's feet.

"What's that—at the bottom of your dress, you slut?"

"Yes, I know," replied Betsey eagerly; "the braid's off, I must mend it. I wish I wasn't so untidy."

"Don't wish yourself different, you'll do as you are," Miss Altamont observed almost fondly. "It's part of your easy-going character. If you had anything in the nature of a fixed principle about you, you could not put up with Wilfrid!"

"I do that for your sake!"

"Well, you won't have to do it much longer for my sake."

Mrs. Altamont shivered. The cruel, hard, precise voice of Miss Altamont went on:

"I know it. So do you. The warrant's out. . . . Why do you jump? . . . The warrant for my death, I mean. A slow aneurism, that's what I've got—may leak any moment! You may as well get used to the idea, Betsey—I have. Think of the cistern, and that tiresome old plumber's business we used to dread so—that will keep it before your mind. I can play with it even. Just a shock, and one of those clumsy big arteries! . . . God sends out careless men sometimes, like Jones the plumber, who don't care, any more than Jones's man does, if he gives the other boss, Death, a job or no!"

"Oh, my dear, do stop! I don't need to keep horrors before my mind; I can take care of you without."

"Very pretty and feminine! But it's better, in the long run, to be mentally armour-plated, like me, you'll find. Nothing affects me or ever did. But you, Betsey, you'd go over like a ninepin, or a dressmaker's dummy, the first thing that happens to you. Then you'll lose your bearings—make the

mistake of your life—I beg your pardon, the second mistake! Wilfrid has the honour of being the first, hasn't he?"

"I really don't know what I'd do," Betsey murmured, ignoring the allusion to her marriage. "It's all a matter of what kind of make of heart you've got. Mine's splendid."

"Yes, I should say so. But then Life doesn't touch you, at least that's what I always hear you complain of. It's rather revolting to think, isn't it, that I, whose brain is so steeled to endurance, fine-grained, and tempered, should have been furnished, as I have been, at the General Giving out of tools we call Birth, with an inferior make of heart, that may fail me at any time! I am rather like a person under an operation, whose calm is guaranteed by an anæsthetic, and yet, the mere shock of being cut may have an opposite result! The brain has nothing whatever to say to it; the unruly cells take the law into their own hands. It knocks all that balderdash they talk about a separate soul and so on completely on the head."

There was an inquiring note, in spite of the polemical arrogance with which the old woman spoke, pathetically underlying her firm expression of opinion. It disquieted Betsey. She was used to the senile vanity and pride of intellect which old Miss Altamont had transmitted to her son. It disgusted her in the son; she considered it a delightfully healthy symptom in the mother. But this new note of pain-giving?—she wondered if the thing that had happened, if some subtle effluence from the great moral disaster which had befallen their house, was even now beginning to permeate matter, penetrating the kindly doors and walls that warded off from knowledge the person most interested? Had this very sanctum of age and infirmity been reached at last?

She sturdily cut up the roast chicken, saying, in an off-hand manner, "Well, the main point is, that you shan't have a shock if I can help it!"

Miss Altamont ate well. She had two helpings of chicken

and some blancmange. She liked her dinner and commended Betsey's bread-sauce—" the most difficult thing in the world to make, my dear, and generally confided to the kitchen-maid."

When the tablecloth had been removed, and the green baize shone forth again, she looked hard at Betsey.

" You made that sauce, my dear, and scorched your face doing it. You look hot."

" Indigestion," remarked Mrs. Altamont.

" Oh, you had your dinner first, had you ? Then you may as well sit down and we will have a talk."

" May I leave the window open ? "

" Yes, certainly. I shall be glad of a little air."

Betsey fervently opened the window looking on the High Street. A delicious breath of mild air, with the faintest touch of frost in it, rushed into the room. Miss Altamont drew a long breath of enjoyment.

" You're sure it won't hurt you ? " the younger woman said anxiously. " I shall only leave it a minute or two."

" You'll leave it just as long as I say it is to be left," Miss Altamont bade her imperiously. Then she laughed. " I don't mean to be cross to you, Betsey, you're a good girl and the joy of my poor old life. Sit down and subside. I want to drivel to you."

Mrs. Altamont sat down within the room. The standard lamp was between her and the window and Miss Altamont's chair and fitted table. The old lady could not see her face, which had now resumed more or less its normal aspect, for Betsey was young.

" For a stoic," remarked Miss Altamont, " I am a good deal plagued with reminiscences to-night. Wilfrid and his corals ! Think of that ! Corals before morals ! He was a dear little baby. They're all alike then. Once, only once, I showed him to his father, and his father kissed him. Just to please me. I was sillier—more sentimental in those days. Never passion-

ate. It wasn't in me. And it would have suited me! We were about to part, then, not in bitterness, as you can judge by what I tell you. We just dissolved the contract, it had grown inconvenient. To him. He stuffed a hundred-pound note into the baby's hand. . . . Then he turned to me, and said, 'It's a good thing you don't love me, isn't it, Julia?' You see it was up to me to convince him of that."

"But didn't you—a little?"

"Not even to justify myself in your eyes, Betsey, will I own to the littlest, teeniest bit. Yet he was a fascinating man. And he was my only lover. I was perfectly faithful to him, though he did not exact it. And wasn't, of course, to me. But he played the game! Everything was cut and dried—dull, even. I knew he didn't mean to keep me always. Perfectly square, he was. He meant to marry, so as to have children. And then—bad luck!—he didn't manage to marry. I don't say didn't have children. A many, doubtless! Other little Wilfrids."

Betsey was silent a moment. Then she observed:

"You are the wickedest, dearest old woman in the world. Sure you're not catching cold?"

"No. I shan't catch cold till I want to. Betsey, listen to me. It's rather interesting—if you care about that sort of thing! This afternoon while you were out I heard the voice of Joris distinctly. I have heard it before,—at crises of my life. Yet we weren't really intimate. Odd, isn't it? These telepathic messages are quite irresponsible! I wonder if Wilfrid did succeed in getting speech of him, and if they spoke of me? That would account for it."

"Would it?"

"They say so, the psychologists. Thought transference. Brain waves. All nonsense. But rather fun!"

Again Betsey had the vision of the brain-shattering bullet and the bald head prone. . . . She spoke up, though, flippantly, for it was incumbent on her to treat matters lightly.

Miss Altamont was in an excited state she was sure, and it was bad for her.

"Oh, you mean a sort of mental marconigram!" she exclaimed.

"Something of the sort. Poor Joris! I wonder, has he worn as well as I have? If so, he must be a fine old man by now. What's that they're shouting, Betsey?"

Betsey apprehended at once. The danger was imminent. A little London screech-owl was coming round the corner where London Villas debouched into the High Road, opposite Worksop House. . . .

She rose hastily, ejaculating, "Cold. . . . The window."

"Be quiet! I want to hear!" said Miss Altamont decisively. "Please to send out and buy a paper!"

The peccant piece of braid on the bottom of Betsey's dress caught in the supports of the standard lamp, and threw her to her knees. She surrendered, instinctively, not to upset the lamp. A choice of evils had presented itself to her in a flash, but practically no other course was open to her. . . . The shrill-voiced lad was actually under the window, extolling his wares.

"Special! Murder! Murder! Sir Joris Veere. . . . Horrible murder. . . ."

He passed away. The movements of Georgie were heard below, frantically unbolting bars, and flinging out of the front door, with a loud call to the boy.

Then came the clash of the window, as Mrs. Altamont brought it down with a rush, breaking the cord, but too late! The mischief was done. The old mother had heard.

"Find out! Find out! Buy a paper!" She spoke quite clearly. "Wilfrid! . . . Wilfrid has killed his father, hasn't he? Be quick! . . ." She bent and settled in her chair and began to speak lower, in a sharp, concise whisper, as if, practical even *in extremis*, she were husbanding her dying resources. . . .

" You knew it ? Tell me, tell me, quick ! Don't faint, I'd be dead before you came to ! The famous aneurism ! . . . I want to speak. . . . I've something to say . . . Wilfrid . . . murder ! . . . No, don't touch me, I shan't fall. . . ."

The voice died down. The breathing became monstrous . . . portentous. . . .

Betsey's arm was round the old woman, and it supported her shoulders as her head fell forward. She did not slip down in the chair, her dress was stuff and the chair covered with some rough substance, and the scooped table in front upheld her.

Betsey had never seen death, but she thought—nay, knew, with an animal's practical instinctive knowledge—that this must be it. Miss Altamont's breathing was not like any suspiration she knew. Still retaining her hold on her darling's shoulders, she lunged forward with one arm and reached the hand-bell, that stood on the table in front, and rang it vigorously.

Georgie appeared.

" Hold your tongue, Georgie, and go for Dr. Gedge, quick ! Don't stop to put a hat on."

And Betsey stood for five mortal minutes leaning half over the back of the chair. It was torture. Her forehead was pearled with sweat. She had not yet looked the dead woman in the face, framed by its immaculate upspringing frills. She dared not.

Georgie returned, cowering, to the door.

" Don't whisper. Have you got him ? "

" He's coming, mum," Georgie nearly shouted, and at her back appeared the form of Dr. Gedge. Betsey leaned forward. She still did not dare to abandon her position as supporter of the inert mass.

" Come here ! Come here, quick ! " she begged. " Save her, can you ? She's my dearest, she's my——"

Dr. Gedge gently put her aside. She became quiet all at

once and submissively helped him to move the patience board away that penned the body in so nicely. Still it did not collapse. The semblance of life-like pose was dreadful. Georgie, unless directly commanded to help, hung back. Betsey, bright-eyed, feverish, like a young Bacchante, with awestruck eyes averted from the image of death, assisted the doctor to lay the tall woman on her bed, where he slowly and methodically verified the fact of decease.

"How did it happen?" he asked her.

"She got a shock."

"Ah, yes! The murder of Sir Joris, eh?"

Betsey nodded. "*I* didn't tell her."

"Why did you let her hear?"

"I couldn't stop it. Those boys yelled it out under the open window. They ought to be whipped."

"Tcha! When did she dine?"

"Half an hour ago."

"Well?"

"Yes, rather."

"Well, listen now. I'll go home at once and telephone for a nurse——"

"What for? Can't Georgie and I——"

"She'd be no good for that."

"I don't want any one to touch Miss Altamont but me."

"Nonsense! You can help the nurse." He spoke to Georgie. "Go down to your kitchen, and have some hot water ready. Now, Mrs. Altamont, do you mind——"

"I mind nothing."

"Very good. Stay here, then, till I come back."

"You *will* come back?"

Her lovely distracted eyes travelled to his, and the doctor felt their appeal in full.

"As soon as I can."

"There are such a lot of dreadful things to do——"

"I'll take them all off your hands, as far as possible. I

mean about your mother-in-law—register the death and so on. I am afraid I can't——"

"The inspector says I'll have to attend something to-morrow—within twenty-four hours."

"Oh, I daresay they'll be able to manage the preliminary inquiry without you. There were plenty of people about who saw it. But you'll probably have to go in a couple of days or so to the coroner's court. *That* you can't get off."

"I don't see why not," she said violently. "There's no defence, that I can see. The only decent thing about it is that he tried to take his own life after killing his father and mother. Oh, why couldn't they let him die? . . . Why must they be carrying him off to a hospital, saving him to be hanged? He *will* be hanged. I hope he'll be hanged. I long for him to be hanged. He has killed the best woman that ever lived."

"Not killed her exactly," said Gedge soothingly. "Her heart was in a very delicate state, and you say that you gave her a full meal? I shall send you a sleeping-draught, Mrs. Altamont, which you are to take, mind."

"Oh, I'll take it, I'll take it. I'd take poison if you were to give it to me! Do, now, doctor!"

"Don't be silly!"

"My life's over!"

"Just beginning, perhaps!" he said, and fled.

IX

Mrs. Wormeley and Miss Simmons and young Master Albany stood at the door of Worksop House, expostulating with Mrs. Altamont's Georgie, who stoutly refused them entrance, though able and willing to inform them of the date fixed for Miss Altamont's funeral, and the place of burial.

"But why not see us?" whined Mrs. Wormeley. "And here's Master Albany's brought her some nice white flowers."

"She said I was to let no one go past this door."

"No one, but I'm not anybody, nor is Miss Simmons. We're her oldest friends."

Mrs. Altamont, in a blue gown, crossed the hall at that moment, and Mrs. Wormeley interposed her bulk knowingly between Georgie and the handle of the door.

"Oh, Betsey, there you are! *Don't* mind being seen in colours."

"I won't be seen at all."

"But, Betsey, how can you bear it, all alone in the house with a corpse?"

"I'm not alone."

"A servant's nothing. Betsey, my husband read about you in the paper this morning. It said you were quite overcome when you got back from the inquest, prostrate were the words, and Mortimer kindly said at once, 'Go and look her up.'"

"That was that horrid reporter, Georgie," said Mrs. Altamont, turning to the maid as if the two ladies were not

there ; " the one that got past you last night. Don't you let it happen again. . . . There's one coming now. Be quick ! "

Georgie, thus admonished, executed a flank movement, adroitly dislodged Mrs. Wormeley, and shut the door in the faces of the two inquiring women, and a slim, pale, serious young man who had just crossed the road exactly in front of Worksop House.

" That's dod a reborter, I don'd bedieve ! " ejaculated Miss Simmons, who had a bad cold ; " too smart-looking ! "

They turned away ; Mrs. Wormeley had shopping to do and all her books to pay. The supposed reporter approached and spoke to them, with negligent deference.

" I beg your pardon, but was that Mrs. Altamont you were speaking to at the door just now ? "

His address was just civil and just haughty enough to charm them.

" Yes," exclaimed Miss Simmons eagerly, struggling with her b's and d's, " and she won't see us, her best friends."

" She must be very busy," said he gently.

" Oh, yes, naturally," said Mrs. Wormeley, walking along with him. " Her mother-in-law died—you know—on hearing what her son had done."

" The poor old dear had a weak heart ! " volunteered Miss Simmons, across Mrs. Wormeley. How much farther did he mean to walk along with them ? It was flattering. He asked Mrs. Wormeley, bending forward politely :

" And do you know when the old lady is to be buried ? "

" On Thursday, at a place called Charlton. The family have a grave there. We shall all go if we can."

" —If my cold is better," put in Miss Simmons.

" Were you thinking of attending it, Mr. —— ? " Mrs. Wormeley hazarded.

The stranger stepped off the pavement at her side, suddenly.

" I may do so. Good day, madam, and thank you for your information."

He raised his hat and crossed over and a side-turning soon hid him from their view. They fancied they heard the snort of a motor in the direction in which he had gone, but decided it could not belong to one so unfurred and so commercial in style.

"I do believe he's a reporter after all," said Mrs. Wormeley.

"I am afraid so. Well, I'll nurse my cold, and go if I can, just to see who else goes."

"I'm quite well, but I'm not sure Morty will let me go when it comes to the point. He doesn't approve of women going to funerals, and you must admit it's rather backing up poor Miss Altamont, her irregular life and so on, to go to her funeral, now, isn't it?"

"It's about the last thing you can be asked to do for her, the last call, as you might say," said Evangeline. "Dr. Gedge says he will go if he has time, and anyway he'll lend Betsey his carriage. But I don't for a moment suppose Agnes Gedge'll put herself out. She'll hate the carriage being lent, and she doesn't really care for Betsey."

"Jealous!" said Mrs. Wormeley. "I'll just run in here, dear, do you mind?—and pay Crump."

"I suppose," said Evangeline, managing, by a process carried to perfection by shopping women, to continue the conversation where it had left off when Mrs. Wormeley reissued beaming—Mr. Crump's pleasure at being paid had communicated itself to her, "I suppose she considers that Betsey makes eyes at him."

"She does—make eyes, I mean—and at everybody. Mostly at men, of course. It's the worst of being what they call a man's woman. She is that, don't you think?"

"Oh, distinctly."

"And do you notice that while one is reading up and discussing all those sort of things, about women like her especially, she knows it all, like the palm of her hand, or as Morty knows

the procedure of the Stock Exchange? She *is* it. She's nothing to learn from books."

"Yes, she makes books—and I write her," said the novelist proudly.

"Look what's happened to her now! It's very sad, of course, but one can't imagine such a thing coming in any one of our lives!"

"Oh, I don't know!" said Evangeline thoughtfully; "after all, what is it? A murder. Our husbands—I mean mine if I had one—might commit a murder."

"Not they!" Mrs. Wormeley replied, in the accents of contempt. "Don't you see, we should never marry that kind of man, and he wouldn't ever marry us. People like Betsey Altamont gravitate naturally to tragedy and the papers. She fell quite easily into the pitfall of marrying Altamont. We don't even know if his name is really Altamont, nor does she. It was just his mother's old stage name."

"Delightfully all of a piece!" said Evangeline. "And the old woman must have had a life's experience and a half! I envy Betsey having her to talk to all those years! I shall certainly go and support her—stick by her at Charlton, if I am better. And so I don't think I'll go in here with you, Madge, it's so draughty lounging round these vegetable baskets. I do think a greengrocer's shop is the rawest place in the world! Good-bye, Albany, young man, what a dull time you've had, poor child! And he never saw his Betsey, did he, or had a chance to give her his flowers, had he? Give them to me, then, my pet, instead. You won't? Isn't it funny how he adores her, Madge?"

X

Thursday dawned, muddy and dank. The air was a wet medium, in which the dreary motes of fog seemed to quiver, encompassing all terrestrial objects in a mist of shifting particles. It was not yellow, it seemed to contain a dull hint of ice and snow, rather than the offscouring of countless chimneys; and suggested Alpine heights more closely than the neighbourhood of gibbering humanity.

Charlton, on the heights of Blackheath, seemed a long way off to all those who had promised themselves that they would accompany Miss Altamont on her last journey. Mr. Mortimer Wormeley's faintly expressed prohibition was seized on as an excuse, ratified and self-enforced by his, for the nonce, obedient wife. She had not see Evangeline Simmons since Tuesday, but that young person's cold was sure to be better, and her upspringing curiosity would act as a spur and surely drive her to see how Betsey behaved at Charlton.

Actually, Miss Simmons was in bed—unable now to substitute d for b, unable to speak at all. Mrs. Gedge looked her up and pacified her by telling her that Dr. Gedge was taking the bit between his teeth and intending to drive Mrs. Altamont to Charlton in his carriage.

Mrs. Altamont voyaged alone. An urgent case called Dr. Gedge at the last moment and prevented his sharing his carriage with her. To his wife's intense annoyance, he did not take back his generous and unnecessary offer, but pursued his profession by the help of the District Railway. Betsey had got, and retained, his soft side.

She thought that on the whole she preferred to be alone, in this the first great sorrow of her life. She was glad that none of her so-called friends volunteered, though she felt she could have done with Georgie! The little maid-servant would have been the best possible company for a person in her condition, being merely a human being with a positive genius for holding her tongue. But some one had to stay at home to mind the house.

So Betsey sat alone in a corner of the compact little professional brougham, stupid with misery, half stunned by the continued impact of intolerable reminiscence, for more than an hour, till with a jerk the carriage drew up. . . .

The white fog settled round it, obliterating space, annihilating time. A man standing at a looming iron gate opened the door for her, let down the step, and she got out. The bulk of the carriage was wiped out at once, and it was Betsey's instinct, set down as she was in a cloud, to hang on to the only two solid objects she saw, the spiked black gate and the opaque black functionary who stood there.

She walked along. Presently, through the surging, uneasily shifting mist, she was aware of the box-like mortuary chapel of the cemetery, with its stern cupola, that hung, like a dish-cover, exactly over the spot on the marble floor where Miss Altamont was placed. The coffin was raised on an elevated pedestal. Some quiet person—she saw no one's features—escorted her to a pew, and handed her a little purple bound book of the service. This, among other minor details, had, as Betsey found afterwards, been arranged by Miss Altamont herself, months before.

She sat and stood, all in order, looking up, spellbound, at the huge Frankenstein monster made of shining elm which held all that was left of her best beloved, the erring woman, the mother of a murderer, an accessory heroine like herself to the Perton *cause célèbre*. The coffin had cost forty pounds odd. The gilt handles of the immense wooden structure

shone, its sides were planed with exactitude. It looked for all the world like a brand new wardrobe at Maple's that Betsey had once coveted !

She shuddered. The organ was playing gloomily. How lucky it was that the audience could not guess her grotesquely inappropriate thoughts ! She thought them, although she was so miserable. She even wondered if she had remembered to bring a second handkerchief, and if so, where was it ?

She heard a cough behind her—a cough she knew. It was that permanent affection, the curse of poor Mr. Downes, the little local lawyer who had drawn up Miss Altamont's will. He was there, then, neglecting his health in token of respect. She felt a rush of liking for him. What a shocking day for him to come out ! She peered sideways through her veil, and ascertained that the little chapel was fairly full—of men. The Vicar of St. Faith's was there, and the butcher whom Miss Altamont had always " paid regular ! " Betsey was pleased with them, but disgusted with her class, and her own sex especially. Men were best after all. She thought she would never speak to the ladies of The Pines and The Magnolias and The Beeches again. Men were simpler, straighter, less fiddling. They had all respected Miss Altamont, a good tenant, a good client, a good customer, and they were here to prove it. Their stay-at-home, recalcitrant women, probably, took mean sartorial and health considerations into account. They had not been able to " fake up " becoming mourning in time, or fancied the damp would take their feathers out of curl. Yet surely Evangeline, whose wardrobe she knew intimately, might easily have laid a temporary layer of black material over the blue strappings of her winter jacket, if she had been so inclined, and have wrapped up her throat. She had not cared—none of them had cared. And Betsey had tried to amuse them in the old days—had let off expensive mental fireworks for them,

had stood on her head, so to speak. She would take care never to amuse them more! She would never see them again.

Some one was speaking all this time, words that she knew by heart, but could not hear. She had rather not hear them or be made to think of them; they were words that she could not even read alone in the silence of her chamber without crying. And now that they were applicable to the only thing she had ever loved on earth! . . .

She bit her lip, and stared up at the coffin, fixing her eyes on the single wreath that hung over on her side. The waxen white petals of the flowers focussed her tearless eyes. If she once allowed the salt rush to invade them, she would not be able to stop, and she knew that when the droning recitative was over they would all go out for the further trial of the open grave. Tears—useless tears—they were but a savage grace—she was not a crying woman. She had taken that anonymous wreath quite calmly, when it came last night, and Georgie had hatcheted the box open in the dining-room. It came from Brooks' in Regent Street, and no card was attached. It gave her no pleasure. She really disliked flowers associated with mourning. It vexed her to see them wither in the faint airs of a death chamber. But the sender's intentions must be carried out, and she had told Georgie to lay the wreath reverently on the bed upstairs. The undertakers had been careful to forward it along with the coffin.

The short service was over. Betsey left her little purple book in the pew, and her handkerchief. With the slow circumscribed step of official mourning, the little party filed out of the chapel, towards the corner of the cemetery where the grave had been dug, and where three or four men in pale corduroys stood ready, spade in hand. Two of them held wide hempen bands. . . .

She heard the swish of a car, and its rapid arrest just by the gate. An individual in motor disguise joined the

troop. But Betsey, the only woman of the party, did not turn.

The coffin was lowered into the grave by means of those bands she had noticed. It was heavy. The quiet, solemn men in corduroys seemed to turn from mourners into rough, casual labourers, grunting and sweating at their ugly material task of putting something into the ground. . . .

More words were spoken. Said out of doors, falling one by one from the tame officiating clergyman's mouth, mauled by his dripping moustache, and going off in smoke, they gave Betsey the same sensation of unreality that tea in Mrs. Wormeley's garden, and the flat clash of china cups in the open air, had been used to give. Then a few sods—grains of earth charily husbanded, were shed perfunctorily, as one scatters salt, on the coffin lying deep in the clay cavity, far below. They rattled, trivially. . . .

"*Earth to earth, dust to dust!* . . ."

The solitary wreath of unknown *provenance* was lowered down on to the coffin. Betsey turned away in instinctive disgust. Those fair upstanding petals would be dashed, bent, overwhelmed by a heavy, clayey burden. . . . It was as if she herself should be hurt! . . . Miss Altamont had never cared for flowers—at least, not for flowers cut and maimed, pilloried in a drawing-room! . . . It was a useless, tasteless observance, without true or noble significance.

At the risk of being thought heartless, Betsey remained sullenly apart, as the other mourners looked their last at the wreath and the metal plate bearing the name *Julia Lane Adamson*. She was practically alone, standing with her eyes downcast, when the stranger in the motor garb, after a brief glance into the grave, detached himself from the group and approached her respectfully. She was inclined to run away and hide; she was for the moment, pure, suffering, unconscionable animal.

"Pray don't take me for a reporter," he said gently.

The soft thinnish voice attracted her. She turned, her eyes met his. She thought she had seen him before and liked him.

He went before the question that was shadowed by her inquiring eyes.

"I am here," he said, "to show my respect for Miss Altamont."

"Was it you who sent the wreath?" she asked eagerly.

"Yes. That's nothing. May I——?" The knot round the newly-made grave began to scatter, and he spoke low and hastily. "Excuse me, but how are you going back?"

Betsey made no reply, but walked a little way in the direction of the gate of the cemetery. He took it as evidencing her weakness—a sort of faint feckless encouragement. But as a matter of fact, Betsey only wanted to get away from the condolences of the others.

Though she longed for them she did not think she could manage to bear them and keep her handkerchiefless calm. To his question, her answer, if any, should be the sight of her calling up her own carriage.

They reached the gate of the cemetery. Dr. Gedge's coachman, by some ocular marvel, sighted her, in the feathery mist which was lifting a little, and approaching, drew up by the kerb.

"Are you going alone?" asked the young man, at her elbow.

"I came alone."

"No woman with you?"

"There's no woman belonging to me—now!"

Her voice broke on the "now." He breathed a faint "Hush!" and cleverly propelled her away from the footboard of her own conveyance, a little further along towards the big covered motor that stood behind it. It was large and seemed to form a positive clearing in the fog, a displace-

ment of the mist. He had not touched her . . . but she assented. . . .

"Come, get in!" he said, still in the same gentle, even tones; and she obeyed him. He, she, and the motor, with its stolid chauffeur, seemed alone on a peak—in Blackheath.

XI

She gave him no direction, nor did he ask her for any. The car started.

Presently she turned to him.

"I am in such sorrow that I am letting you do as you like with me. Who are you?"

"I am Ernest Rose Veere."

She looked blank behind her veil.

"Isn't the name at all familiar to you?"

"Oh, yes," said she, without any sign of intelligence. She was worn out with sensation. He spoke to her as to a little child.

"Your maid shut the door in my face last Monday. Two women were there then. Why are not those two women here with you to-day? It's disgraceful."

"I did not want them," she answered earnestly. "I'm rather glad—I mean relieved—that they're not here." She thought, but was not within measurable distance of saying, that she found her present companion far more soothing. Then she gave her intelligence a jog. "But you were saying . . . that's why I came with you, I think—that you knew my mother-in-law and—liked her?"

"I did not have the advantage of knowing her personally, but I knew nothing but good of her. My—Sir Joris had the highest regard for her."

"He spoke of her?"

"Seldom. You understand. But kindly. He was a splendid fellow, a dear old man."

"Was!" Betsey murmured. "Oh, it is awful!" She shrank away back into her corner again.

"But we know—we all know—that the poor soul who's dead had no part in sending her son to murder my uncle!"

She sat bolt upright. "Oh, that is who you are! I must get out. Stop the car—oh, do stop the car!"

"I shall do nothing of the kind. There's no reason, is there, because you happen to be linked to the man who killed the uncle, that the nephew shouldn't be a friend to you. I mean to be. Won't you let me, Mrs. Altamont? I am quite harmless, not pushing. I didn't mean to intrude on your grief, only to show you that I shared it. Hang it all, I've lost a person dear to me too! Don't forget that. He was like a father to me. . . ."

"Yes, oh, yes, that's what I felt. You must hate the sight of my face!"

"On the contrary," he said, "I long to see it. Won't you put your veil up? You chose to swear Scotch fashion the other day in court, so as to avoid raising your veil, and be snapshotted by the paper men, eh?"

"Yes, that was the reason."

"I thought it so fine of you. Lift it! Lift it, please."

She obediently raised the thick crape veil and flashed bleared, drowned eyes at him.

He said, "Thank you. Put it down again—the light hurts you, doesn't it?"

"I should think it did!" she added. "I have seen you before somewhere, haven't I?"

"I don't know. Where?"

"I know. At the launch of the *Elisabetta* at Hinderland. You found me a place next Wilfrid—that day. He was a reporter then."

"Then it was I who——"

"Yes, you brought us together." She wept copiously.

She felt this slim stranger to be like the brother she had

never known. His off-hand tenderness, his blunt style, his queer lackadaisical way of taking an interest in her, fostered her confidence, where delicate deferentiality and half-shades of politeness would have withered it. He talked to her as a fifth form boy might talk to a new fellow. Yet he admired her too, he had singled her out at Hinderland, because of her flashy hair, as she supposed. She looked a fright now, but the subtle sense of sex was there all the time with its flattering possibilities. Without it a woman, a woman like Betsey Altamont, can never be entirely at her ease with a man.

So she gave way as in the presence of a comrade, her beauty and the uses of it tacitly in abeyance, and only some such queer freemasonry as might exist between a pair of married lovers to excuse her lapse into the infirmity of tears. Her handkerchief proved ridiculously inadequate—she had left the supplementary one in the chapel. It was not long before she became aware of a hardy, capacious, man's sample of the useful square being thrust into her hand. She took it eagerly, and squeezed herself into the corner of the car, resisting an absurd and improper wish to lay her head on the neighbouring shoulder. The owner of it had, however, no notion of inviting her to do so. That was not in his methods.

His brow was knit, he was thinking out some plan.

The car stopped.

"Oh, where are we?"

"At your home—so called." He did not stir.

"Will the chauffeur ring the bell?" she asked.

"Yes—or I will——" He got out and entered into conversation with his man.

As a result of it, no bell was rung. Mrs. Altamont had just uncrossed her knees and gathered her legs together preparatory to alighting, when he got in again, and the car went on. She looked mute interrogation.

"We are going to dine at the Albemarle together, quietly. Then I'll drive you back. Though I don't think

you ought to be here, all night, alone. I wonder if Dobrée——"

She interrupted fervently.

"No, really, I must not go with you. Please let me go home. I have things to see to!"

"No, you haven't. That's just the worst of it. Is there any one in the house?"

"There's Georgie."

"Who's Georgie? Oh, the servant! She's not company. You want to be taken out of yourself. I can do it, I think."

"Yes, but I——"

"My dear Mrs. Altamont, or Adamson, the die is cast, we are three miles away from your house already! I told him to get along. I'm exceeding the speed limit in this, as in everything else—our acquaintance, I mean. I'm not one to dawdle, I'm afraid, either in love or business. You're going to dine with me. Be easy. I'm quite dependable, you'll find! Haven't time to be anything else. Trust me, do!"

XII

The porter of the club evidently knew Veere very well. In the cloakroom an obsequious attendant came forward to meet Betsey, removed her jacket, poured out hot water for her and tendered hairpins. Betsey meekly washed her face and "did" her hair, and subtly regained a measure of self-respect. She began to be sorry she had given away so in the carriage, and allowed a man to see her cry. She had seen in his eyes when she foolishly raised her veil at his request, that he had not thought her much to look at.

The big black hat with the sweeping feather went on again over the gold meshes of her hair. The shadow of the brim hid to a certain extent those traces of the day's discomfiture that only time would remove, and it was a pretty, fundamentally healthy-looking young woman who issued forth shyly to meet her host.

Impassive, easy, as usual, he threw down his illustrated paper, and rose to escort her to the dining-room.

There, mild shaded lights, softly gliding waitresses, delicate meats and exhilarating wines reddened her lips, though they could not so soon bring back the colour to her bleached face, made paler by the showers of rice-powder she had nervously applied in a mere futile effort to relieve the stinging smart of tears. Her lips were scarlet, raw almost, with her unconscious biting of them. The blunted arrows of her eyes were pathetically inefficient. They refused to convey the mute, indeterminate appeal that, from habit, she was willing to throw

into them. She sat opposite Veere and ate her dinner like a charity child.

Her simple, unobtrusive sorrow, the pleasure she evidently took in being petted, her innocent response to his sincerely meant kindness, touched the young man. He thought he had discovered a prize in this woman with the serene lack of affectation, of vanity and self-consciousness. She would always get everything, for she asked nothing, except that you should be nice to her. Woman's arts, if she had any, and they were naturally in abeyance for the moment, would be instinctive instead of feigned. She was charming, unexpected, different from Dobrée and Lady Maude and the others. He promised himself not to lose sight of her. He would see what she was like when she was recovered and up to her normal form. Meanwhile he occupied himself with her physical wellbeing.

She had gone, and must still go, through a great deal. The situation was uncommon. He had helped to make it more so. Idly, from some inborn want of taste and reserve, actuated by curiosity, and a constitutional desire to get to the root of matters, he had followed up this trail. He had sought out the wife of his uncle's murderer, and attended the funeral of that uncle's pensioned mistress. With the modernest audacity he had brought Mrs. Altamont here, to a discreet West End club, and was giving her dinner. That she was presentable—more than presentable—was an accident and Veere's own luck. Outside on the pavement, beyond the flower-banked window, people were probably walking up and down discussing her affairs and his. Newsboys were hawking papers containing full accounts of her felon husband's health, and assessing the probabilities of his ever being sufficiently recovered to stand his trial for an act which had placed him, Ernest Rose Veere, in his uncle's place, and made him heir to a vast property and a world-wide, well-established business.

This and other sensational arrangements of fact passed through the young man's mind as he sat opposite Betsey Altamont, or Adamson, to be dismissed as soon as concocted and the pleasurable stimulus fairly derived from the antithesis. He studied her face keenly, but with diplomatic delicacy, lest he should annoy her in her present state of raw sensitiveness.

Betsey, on the other hand, did not focus him. He was little more to her than a minister to her present entertainment, her rescuer from the gloomy House of Death to which she must by and by return. She was acutely conscious of the physical delight of the warm club, of the good wine that soothed and bemused her a little, even of the footstool run in under the table to her numbed feet by a waitress. She was warm, now, for the first time since Miss Altamont had died. It brought it home to her how much and in how many ways she had suffered during the short space of five days—those five days dating from Mrs. Wormeley's day "at home," in which tragedy had come to her, and she had "lived" at last.

The young man opposite was talking about a certain Lady Dobrée de Saye, of whom she did not think she had ever heard. This Lady Dobrée appeared to be a madwoman of fashion, who "would be so much interested in her." Mr. Veere spoke of this lady as if he were engaged to her, without, however, precisely stating it as a fact. Betsey did not care. He was talking of Lady Dobrée now, propounding all sorts of wild-cat schemes in that low, even, colourless voice of his. Betsey thought he was the quietest, and at the same time the most dashing person she had ever met. He seemed made of quicksilver. He reminded her of some neat, polished tool of refined steel. His appearance, as he sat lightly on a chair opposite her, leaning forward on his elbows, was as different as possible from Wilfrid's dark, foreign, hairy, night-bird sort of looks. Wilfrid was handsome; this man was clean. Wilfrid had beautiful, terrible eyes; Mr. Veere's were small,

cold, and inexpressive. His face, clean-shaven, was not a face that one remembered ; it was like that of many another young, well-trained, active Englishman. But his thin, rather cruel mouth had, what Wilfrid's never could compass, a ravishing smile now and again, and then he showed, like Wilfrid, a set of regular, business teeth, white and sharp. He was Wilfrid's cousin ! Suddenly that fact came home to her ! . . .

" Shall we go somewhere ? " said he tentatively, when they had dined.

" Where ? "

" Don't look so shocked ! I am afraid I meant a music-hall. It's what a man would do—in your case ! Only I suppose a woman——"

" I don't think I want to go," said she. " I'd go if I did. I understand what you mean. I didn't look shocked, only I can't quite control my muscles, they're stiff with crying. . . . Don't be angry, but I think I'd like to go home. I might sleep, perhaps, if I went now."

He would have liked to take her in his arms, charmed by this halting confession of muscular incompetency. But he replied, coldly :

" Perhaps you might ? One knows best what's good for oneself. We'll go."

She walked upstairs and put on her jacket while he paid the bill. Having done so, he went out into the hall and found her standing there waiting for him, as if she had known him all her life. He wrote the name of his guest in the book, as required by the management, inserting not the one he had known her by, but that of Adamson, the name he had seen on the coffin plate to-day.

His car was waiting at the door, open.

" Do you mind ? " he asked her. " I said we would have it so going back. I fancied a spin in the fresh air might do you good."

Betsey assented gratefully. Henceforth her resistance to any little reasonable arrangement of his was over. A truly feminine woman ; she was now in his hands.

Mr. Veere dismissed the chauffeur and drove himself. At the corner of Albemarle Street, he stopped the car and got out. Betsey did not look to see what shop he went into, she felt too tired to turn her head ; it was not likely to be any concern of hers.

It was, however. Just before they reached Wimbledon, he pulled a sealed pareel out of his pocket.

" Look here, this is what I got out to get at the chemist's. Will you, to oblige me, take one of these ? "

She swallowed it.

" How clever of you to take it without water ! And another when you get into bed ? "

She promised.

They came to Worksop House. He got out and rang the bell. He did not ask her for her latch-key, and it was as well, for that lay in the pocket of the jacket that had been cut away from Altamont's body in St. Frithiof's Hospital.

Georgie, to whom it now appeared Mr. Veere had thought of telegraphing to sit up, opened the door, blinking but kindly welcoming. Mr. Veere, with a sweet indeterminate smile that included Georgie, got into his car again and was gone.

" Oh, ma'am," said Georgie, " I'm so glad you're back ! I've been that lonesome, wondering where you'd got to ! "

" Poor old Georgie, what a selfish pig I was to leave you all alone ! I never thought——"

" Oh, ma'am, it doesn't matter now that you've come back ! Old Ginger's been sitting on my knee all the evening, purring fit to burst himself. He's wonderful company, he is."

" Take him to sleep with you, then," said Mrs. Altamont, wearily following Georgie and her candle upstairs. Georgie had seized that implement from her mistress's yielding hand with a " Let me, mum, you'll spill the grease."

Mrs. Altamont began to undress, with Georgie's help. Mrs. Altamont would have liked to send her out of the room, but realised that the good simple soul could not bear to tear herself away from the newly recovered house-mate, who was her kind, considerate mistress as well.

"Oh, my pill!" Mrs. Altamont exclaimed suddenly.

"What's that for, mum?"

"To make me sleep, I fancy. And I'm half asleep already. Good night, Georgie; I say, sure you don't mind sleeping alone? Will Ginger really do?"

"Oh, yes, mum, Ginger's slept with me all these last nights; he purrs me off to sleep beautiful. Besides, I'm all right now that I've seen you home safe."

XIII

Mrs. Altamont did not know what drug it was that Ernest Veere had given her, but its effect was to make her sleep well into the day. Georgie thoughtfully did not call her. Very slowly and surely she woke to the acutest desolation.

The house seemed only truly empty now that the body of Miss Altamont had been borne away. Until then, one room in it had held, not Miss Altamont, indeed, but A Thing, that having brooded over long and circled round in thought until one plucked up some sort of courage, one went in and looked upon. One posed the Eternal question ? " Where are you ? " and " What are you doing there ? " to the sleeping Silence that lay, cold, imperturbable, framed in satin and laces, in its wooden shell. Then one kissed it to show that one was not afraid of the vastly Infinite, brought suddenly home to the finite creature and within wondering range of its humble vision.

And now, Betsey dared not go near the kernel of horror, that one room, which she *knew* to be empty. She sat stiffly in the hall, with her eyes on the staircase that the coffin had been carried down the day before yesterday. She had been crouching in the dining-room, with the door ajar, while the undertaker's men accomplished their ugly mission. She had heard all, the grunting of the bearers, the strain of the banisters, as the body of Miss Altamont in its wooden enclosure suffered this last indignity of grotesque, helpless transit. Dead and penned in her boarded case, she was forced to

vicariously damage the house and fittings that, living, she had cherished. Betsey likewise knew each danger knob and awkward projection of the staircase with its two wide landings. She had heard, as she sat evilly spellbound, the muttered exclamations of the labouring, sweating coffin bearers, "Mind the corner! Be careful there!" When it was over, when Miss Altamont had crossed her own threshold for the last time, feet foremost, the trembling woman had rushed out of the room to Georgie in the kitchen—smutty, blowzy Georgie, dealing gently with her pots and pans out of sympathy—and had flung her arms round the little handmaid's neck, regardless of the fact that there was a sheepish man hovering in the scullery.

"Georgie!" the mistress duly observed, when she had recovered herself, and Georgie's visitor had slipped away.

"Yes, I know, mum, I've told him so, and he won't take 'No' for an answer!"

"Told him what?"

"That you don't allow no followers."

"Don't I, Georgie? But you must marry some time, I suppose?"

"That's what he says, mum. He says, 'Now, this minute——' Oh, he's all right. But I say as I can't think of leaving you at present, mum, now can I?"

"Not just yet, Georgie; not till after——"

"And perhaps not then, mum; we'll see!"

Georgie no longer stood alone! Georgie had an interest apart, and in spite of her devotion to her mistress, looked beyond to the consolable future. This new tie of Georgie's accentuated Mrs. Altamont's isolation, and discounted the maid's sympathetic cookery and few ill-chosen words of comfort. The tactful mistress must take care to keep out of the kitchen henceforth. Georgie, of course, must have full liberty to see her young man, who was a grocer's assistant in Wimbledon, thoroughly respectable and ready to marry

Georgie at once. It was all right; but it cut the mistress off from the maid, whose simple consolations had soothed her.

She was thrown back on the new friend whom she had so recently and so strangely acquired. He had said that he would look in some time in the day and see how she was. A little dubious about it last night, wondering if she had not given herself away too much, been too easy; to-day she was glad. And his thoughtfulness had benefited her already—the sleeping-draught had carried her through a greater part of that dreadful first day after the funeral, when even people whom the fact of death has left more or less unaffected, feel poignantly, physically depressed.

It was nearly five o'clock. She jumped to her feet, with a sudden feverish activity. She would go into the Death Chamber. She would unbolt the door of the anteroom, bolted since——! She would let herself straight into the tragic arena of two days ago. It was better over. There were papers in a bureau in the inner room, that were perhaps crying to be looked over?

It was done. She was there, standing free in terrible empty spaces, that had been cleared for the passage of the coffin. The low-ceiled rooms seemed vast and spacious. Georgie, good soul, had been in and had swept a little. She had spread a clean sheet over the bed. She had—north-country, superstitious creature—veiled the looking-glass.

The window should be opened. The atmosphere was oppressive and close. Mrs. Altamont walked towards it and tried to raise the sash. It fell again. It would not keep up. The broken cord hung helplessly and told her why. She had broken it herself in that desperate effort to hinder the news from reaching Miss Altamont. She wedged the window open with a chair and then looked round. The packet of patience cards so lately used were put out of sight; Georgie doubtless had thought them a profanity. Betsey stooped and tried to

get hold of a couple of cards that had insinuated themselves behind the skirting-board. One was a knave, the other that unofficial personage called the "Joker." Miss Altamont had made it an ace of spades, in her bold actress-like handwriting. The unhinged Betsey felt it to be prophetic.

"*A spade, to dig a grave.*" It was one of those last touches that break up enforced calm. Betsey sank down on the low prie-dieu chair in which she always had sat to read to Miss Altamont, and buried her face in her hands, so as not to see the dreadful room full of associations, while she thought of what she should do next—how she should get out of it, cut it, forget it. . . .

Buzz! And whirr! The bells of St. Faith's, the church adjoining at the back, began to ring for afternoon service.

She gathered her knees together to flee, outraged; in a few moments more she adjusted herself to the familiar circumstance, and took pleasure in the clear fresh sound. . . .

Soon the usual reverberation was set up. St. Faith's owned a fine peal. The air hummed with clean, sweet tones that allured and uplifted. The process of revivification seemed to extend to her. Still the bells rang on. She took her hands away from her face, and drank in the gay noise. Some true comfort was instilled by this fanfaronade of cheer. It was no longer possible for her thought to wallow in the depths of bitterness. The cup had been drained, and she tossed up her throat, as a drinker may who has gulped down the lees of sorrow and is about to forget the sour taste of woe.

An end, and a beginning! So Dr. Gedge had said—the last words spoken in this room in her hearing!

She would brood no more, she would go on, and walk bravely in the open fields of honest endeavour. Young, handsome, strong, she would eat, sleep, be herself. She would let the dear dead lie, while she, the quick, went about her decreed business of life. Life to be lived and savoured—life that she had not lived yet.

All this the bells suggested to her, they even made her think of young Veere. His fair, blue, unruminating eyes, his well-cut, sharp, intaking nostrils, were akin to the inspiriting hurtle of sound that vibrated now all through the air, for the peal had worked up to its due culmination and sonority. Soon it would drop into the dull summoning monotone. Though she was not in love with him, her mind was wholesomely occupied with the young man. She saw again his neat, straight black hair, brushed smooth, his stiff collar, with its sharp curve that nursed his square chin. She heard again his clean unslurred brevity of speech, that spoke of a level-headedness and dashing efficiency that no lumber of old sad thought, lying derelict about the chambers of the brain, could tangle, distress, or impede.

A somewhat different woman rose as the bells finally called to prayer, and looking up, but neither to the right nor the left, passed into the inner room, and lifted the flap of an old escritoire that stood near the fireplace.

She had forgotten to bring the keys—Miss Altamont's own sacred bunch now in her legatee's possession. She knew if she went back for them she would never return; so, recklessly, she jogged and pulled at the brass knob of one drawer. It yielded, a little the worse for her attack.

"She's left all to me, so it doesn't matter," was her consolatory reflection.

The bells had stopped. She heard the burr of the organ faintly. She felt like a child in mischief—horribly perturbed, but went on courageously rummaging and shuffling.

There were some paper packets in the drawer, inscribed in Miss Altamont's handwriting.

"I am her sole executrix." So saying she opened the first. A packet of plain black-edged cards fell out and on them was neatly written:

"*Mr. and Mrs. Altamont return thanks for kind inquiries and sympathy.*"

There were a dozen of these. For her and her husband. All in form—the best of form. On turning the packet over, she read, in pencil : " To save Betsey trouble after I am dead. N.B.—A round dozen will clear all my friends off ! "

Another packet lying next to this strange piece of meticulousness engaged Betsey's attention.

It contained three smaller parcels, each inscribed, but so faintly that she had to carry them to the light.

" *Wilfrid's hair, aged ten.*"

On the two other packets was written respectively :

" *Wilfrid II., aged three,*" and " *Little Katie's hair.*"

Confronted with these pendant examples of sentiment and cynicism, Betsey quailed, flung them down, and investigated no more.

The first was consistent enough with the character of the perpetrator, as she knew it ; the lock of hair business was a revelation to her, and an unpleasant one.

Miss Altamont knew that she was a grandmother, then ! Wilfrid must have brought her the locks of hair in some moment of expansion, Betsey being absent. Mother and son, at some period, must have had an explanation.

In Betsey's experience of the last five years, Miss Altamont and her son had not addressed more than three or four words to each other. They were practically not on speaking terms. Betsey, at Miss Altamont's desire, had been their interpreter and go-between.

So her darling had performed the manœuvre technically known as " going behind " her ! Even Miss Altamont had been false—untrue to her supposedly beloved daughter-in-law.

The shock was tremendous. In the gathering dusk, Betsey, afraid no more, wept. She cried for rage—sheer blind rage. She was angry with them all. People were all alike ! No one, not even a cynic like the late departed one, could be trusted ! This was almost her bitterest hour. An ideal

friendship torn to ribbons, the intercourse of years honeycombed with suspicions. She had not known how like lovers she and Miss Altamont had been till now, when one party to the alliance proved to have been double-hearted, and in treaty, even for so short a time, with the outside enemy.

Mr. Veere was coming. If he proposed a music-hall, something heartless, something outrageous, she would go.

But he did not propose anything of the kind. He sat down, asked for some tea, and she showed him the contents of the envelope.

"Pathetic!" was what he said.

"Do you realise that's the hair of Wilfrid's illegitimate children that my mother-in-law has been hoarding for years?"

"I see. Those would be the children of Ada Cox, wouldn't they, whose letter was read at the inquest? Poor soul!"

"Poor soul! Poor beast! She was the cause of your uncle's murder."

"Oh, indirectly! One can't make her accessory before the fact. Quite an illiterate woman, I gathered. Had been a model, like everybody else. Well, why don't you go and see her?"

"I?"

"Yes, you! You've got a kind heart, I believe and trust. And if you're upset, what must she be?"

"She's no right to be upset."

"More right than you, for I daresay she loves the man. You don't even pretend to."

"I don't pretend to because I don't—didn't. They are not my children. I never had any."

"Dear thing! How sad! Well, these wretched children —not yours, and so the more wretched, eh?—are probably starving, whose ever they are! At least, that occurred to me, do you know? Hearing the letter read in court, I've been worrying about them a bit."

"Why don't *you* go and relieve them, then?"

" I'd rather do it through you. It would be a graceful act if you were to look her up ; if I went it would be an indecent one. Not really, of course, but in the eyes of the fools we can't afford to affront *all* the time. Look here, do go, feed the children ! I've got a special fibre of my being for them ; it's in my blood—you know they called my uncle the Children's Friend. Do go to Mrs. Cox, and draw on me for supplies. I've got far too much money—he's left me everything and I'd already got some of my own—enough to live on. I shall be getting soft if I don't take care to send myself bankrupt or something stimulating of that kind ! "

" I wish you wouldn't say that ! "

" Superstitious, Mrs. Altamont ? Not you ! Well, will you come and dine with me somewhere quietly—say Richmond, this time ? We'd better not patronise the Albemarle twice running ! Tie yourself up tight, if you don't mind. The car's open. Or—I say, would you honour me by wearing this ? "

She now saw that he had got a cardboard box with him and that it was lying on the table. She opened it, smiling ; it held a smart black motor bonnet that fitted close to the head, with a veil attached.

" I got it at Woolland's. That's where Dobrée goes, and she says it's the best place—in fact, she chose it. I hope it is what you like ? " he said anxiously.

" I haven't got such a thing. You see, I never seemed likely to be going about in motor-cars," Betsey said gratefully. " Of course, I'll wear it ; it's beautiful."

He smiled with pleasure as she ran upstairs to adjust it. He had introduced another woman's name as a test. Some women, he knew, would have raised objections to a hat thus obtrusively godmothered by a more intimate female friend of the donor's, but Betsey was not like that, he was glad to observe, and he had not expected her to be.

He brought her back to Worksop House as usual. As they

drew up a spruce young man in a bowler hat was coming away.

"Who's that?" he asked sharply.

"Georgie's young man. Did you think it was a friend of mine?"

"Tidy young chap enough!" he replied. "Looks as smart as I do. But I didn't ask. It isn't my business to look after you and make inquiries about the character of your admirers. You wouldn't stand it from me."

His tone was wistful. Betsey tried to please him.

"Oh, I don't know," she said gently. "I am going to call upon Mrs. Cox, to-morrow, as you asked me to. Good night, and thank you."

"I can't come to-morrow," said he. "I'm dining out—with Dobrée and her pal, as a matter of fact. But I'll come the next day and hear about your excursion. Shall I send the car for you, as I can't come myself?"

"No, it might frighten Ada, and make her think I was giving myself airs. And I don't expect you to be so kind as to come every day," she said.

"Oh, kind——!" he said. "I began it out of kindness, but I'm going on with it for myself—if you'll let me——?"

XIV

The monstrous twin-eyed tram carried Betsey next day over solitary suburban heights, and lamp-set crowded dales, over Denmark Hill with its mouldering gardens and wooden palings, Camberwell Grove, and over the hill again down into Lordship Lane. There the young woman got out, asked many questions, and was directed to Burckhardt's Grove.

It was nearly dusk, and cold and damp. She wore a black fur jacket that had fitted Miss Altamont closely in the days when Miss Altamont had walked abroad. It draped the slighter Betsey handsomely. It was brown at the seams, particularly under the arms. It would not stultify Ada by its magnificence, but it enhanced Betsey's beauty with its rich darkness, so that whenever she asked the way, the questioned one, after giving his information, turned and looked at her.

She had got no money from Veere, and she had brought very little of her own. She meant to prospect first. She could not bring herself to believe that a minx like Mrs. Cox could be in the straits she had described in her sensational letter to Wilfrid, a letter written, of course, to stimulate him to renewed efforts to increase their exchequer. If she and her children were indeed as destitute as she made out, if Little Katie was growing up maimed and stunted for want of food, then—Miss Altamont's last wish to help her to grow should be respected. Only, where was the money to come from? Immediate housekeeping needs had absorbed nearly all the available funds in the house, though Mr. Veere during these last days had practically boarded her free.

It would be some time before she could inherit. There was no reason, now, why she should refuse her legacy. Wilfrid, if he lived, would be fed and housed by the State, and Wilfrid would not live at all, he would be hanged!

It shocked her a little that Veere should gratify his strong sense of antithesis under the guise of charity. The mistress of the man who had murdered his beloved uncle should not correctly be relieved by the nephew, though it would be picturesque. It was only slightly less picturesque that Ada should be relieved by her lover's mother, but Betsey felt it would be in better taste. She hoped with all her heart that Ada would prove an impostor.

Number ten, Burckhardt's Grove. Betsey found it. Her heart beat.

Burckhardt's Grove was a blind alley, a byway, a section, seemingly, of some steaming African swamp left standing uncleared in the midst of civilisation. Trees, bushes, and low craven houses together, were hideously entangled, a lodge of boughs like Nicolete's would have been drier. Surely no landlord could want to turn a tenant out of this dripping reservoir of disease? Were all the tenants of Burckhardt's Grove as hard up as Mrs. Cox? For at no window of all the dozen houses did light show, no sound came to Betsey's ears except the crunch of her own footfall on the gravel, and the soft, pertinacious swish of rain, intercepted by foliage, that passed it on, in drips, to the sodden earth of the little scrubby cat-runs round each house.

Betsey counted the numbers down from the last she could see by the light of the street lamp at the corner, pulled and rang a silly tinkling cheerful bell that made her jump. The house boasted only one storey. The sill of the upper window nearly met her tall feather.

A woman opened the door—Ada Cox, of course.

She was pale, thin, and tall, with all the strange, blasted beauty of anæmia and consumption. To Betsey's Philistine

eyes she was hideous. There was not an ounce of colour in the face shadowed by crisp black hair. The white chapped upper lip was short and beautifully sucked in, like a mouth in a pre-Raphaelite picture. This, Ada, the minx—this piteous, wild, and faded Belle Dame Sans Merci!

"Mrs. Cox?"

The woman nodded.

"I am Mrs. Altamont . . . Shall I go?"

"Stay if you like!" returned the other, in a strong Cockney accent. She turned and led the way into a room on the right side of the door. There was no light in the passage except what pierced through the dirty, decayed fanlight from the street lamp further down. In the room there was a lamp standing on a packing-case. There was a chair, and two more packing-cases. That was all.

"Sit down," said Mrs. Cox, pulling up the one chair to the box that supported the lamp. "Sit down. It's fairly clean; you won't take nothing away with you."

"Where are the children?"

"In the bed, to keep warm. I'll fetch them down for you presently. Sit down."

Mrs. Altamont complied. She felt sick. This horrible, barren emptiness! Mrs. Cox, grown cool and hardy in proportion to her visitor's dereliction, stood near the door, her arm, bare to the elbow, languidly propped up against the lintel.

"You've come to have a good look at me, haven't you? Well, I'm not much to look at. I was just doing a bit of washing when you called."

"You look awfully tired."

"My dear, what would you have? I'm wore out, that's what I am, with trying to keep a rag on the children's backs, and a bit in their stomachs. It was hard enough when he was here and gave me ten bob a week."

"Was that what he gave you?"

" Yes, and sometimes a little more. How much did he give you ? "

" He never gave me anything. I lived with his mother. I looked after her."

" Did you 'ave help ? "

" Yes, a girl."

" And no children ? I don't know, for Wilfrid wouldn't never talk to me about you."

" No, no children."

" Wanted them badly, I suppose ? "

" Yes, at first."

" That's always the way. Them as wants them can't get 'em, and them as thinks them a nuisance has more than they want."

" You hardly look strong enough——"

" No, more I am. But when I had little Katie I was a strong, healthy girl enough. Used to sit for the figure. But children soon spoils that. Would you like to see 'em now ? I expect that's what you came for, more than to see me ? "

" I came to——" began Betsey. " Yes, I should like to see them, please."

Mrs. Cox disappeared. Betsey had acceded to her request, so as not to seem unkind, though it was Mrs. Cox who interested her most. The woman's thin civility, her indifferent politeness, put her at her ease. A termagant would have revolted her, a whiner disgusted her. The picture that Ada managed to present touched her. That thin, angular drudge had " sat for the figure " before she came into Wilfrid's hands, and bore his children for him !

Mrs. Cox returned, carrying a touzled black-haired boy. A very small girl trotted behind. The boy was the bigger of the two. She was dressed in a kind of petticoat waist, the boy was in a flannelette nightgown.

" Here they are ! Sleepy, poor souls ! She's the eldest,

but she ain't growed like he has. Wretched wizen little thing she is—ain't you, Katie ? "

" *Not enough to eat—I couldn't grow . . . not—enough—to—eat . . . !* "

Like a refrain—like the raindrips from the eaves, punctuating the minutes, outside, these words chanted themselves in the back of Betsey's mind. She held out her hand to the little girl, awkwardly, stupidly, as a childless woman does.

" I keep 'em clean. You can kiss 'em if you want. But perhaps you'd rather not, considering——"

" I don't mind at all," said Mrs. Altamont gently, stooping to Little Katie, and then raising her lips to those of the boy who was held down to her. It was true, they were, and smelt, clean enough. She was, moreover, anxious to remove the misconception that evidently existed in the mind of Ada Cox. The sight of the children of the man she hated gave her only neutral sensations ; they were neither attractive nor repulsive to her.

Mrs. Cox watched Mrs. Altamont—observed her favourably. She made up her mind about her, as an animal does. She let herself go ; she trusted Betsey on her face. She ceased to use her remarkable powers of self-control, and the slow drops began to course down her cheeks, those worn channels for miry scalding tears. She still held the big child mechanically. . . .

" Ah, don't cry, please don't ! " the other woman pleaded, taking the child from her, and nursing him. Mrs. Cox, relieved of her burden, made use of her apron, and held it over her face. The word " Fatherless ! " issued from its folds.

" You are *not* to cry for Wilfrid," repeated Betsey peremptorily, in a voice husky with emotion. " Believe me, he's not worth it. He's selfish, thoughtless, cruel. I've always known it. You're too good for him. I'm too good for him ; he ought never to have been born, he's only done harm in the world, and most to himself."

"That's what I feel," said Ada. "Poor boy! He's never had a chance—the darling!"

Her expressions of tenderness irritated the neglected wife.

"Yes, he had! I'd have been a good wife to him if he'd let me. You *were* a good wife to him—" She stopped. "No—yes—I mean it. And when he's gone, you'll be his real widow." She rose, put the boy down, and patted Ada on the back. The woman's sobs jerked once or twice, and ceased. She looked up inquiringly.

"Didn't you never love him yourself?" she asked.

"No. Or else I wouldn't have been able to come and see you."

"You might have done that for spite," said Mrs. Cox, "just to see the woman he liked better than you."

Betsey was not deterred by this raw statement of fact.

"Look here," she said, "let's not talk of Wilfrid. . . . He's done—finished! I'll try not to abuse him to you, for you feel it, of course. Be practical. I am. How do you go on? Money, I mean?"

"I have none. We're to be turned out day after to-morrow. Rent was paid beforehand——"

"Poor Wilfrid!" said Betsey. "Then, where do you go?"

"What's the use of going anywhere when you ain't got a penny to pay your rent? You go where they'll take you. . . . It's the House, I suppose. River for me, if Wilfrid don't get off!"

"Hush, hush! He won't get off. And if he does, it's prison—quod you call it—for life. I've had it all explained to me. But—let me see—the public'll be getting up a subscription——"

"For you, not for me. You're his lawful wife, aren't you?"

"Ah, don't be snappy with me! I'm trying to think of a plan. . . . Let me see. . . . I've got enough to live on, and keep one servant. . . . My mother-in-law left her money to me."

" Knew how to get the right side of her, I expect."

Betsey asked, disregarding, " Ada, can you cook ? "

" Yes. And then ? "

" Because if you'll come along with the children and live with me, for the present anyway, and do the cooking for us all, I'll send away *my* girl. She wants to go away and get married, so it works out all right. And I'll give you her wages, so you'll feel independent. Then we'll try to get along together and bring up the children. You poor girl ! Smile ! "

" Little Katie never did get quite enough, the doctor said," murmured Mrs. Cox. Her face was irradiated.

" I can pack you all in nicely," repeated Betsey cheerfully, conning the resources of the house accommodation in her mind. " Let me see, I can sleep in Miss Altamont's room and you in mine—and the children in the little room between."

Ada made an inarticulate sound. If anything, it suggested disapprobation, but Mrs. Altamont chose to take it the other way.

" For God's sake, don't thank me ! "

" I wasn't a-going to, azackly," said Mrs. Cox. " You say you do want a servant. It's very good of you to take me with the burdensome children too, but I'll give you good value for your money, and, of course, I shan't take your wages, and I can cook. I learned off my mother, who was a wonderful clever woman. I know how to make folk comfortable. I made him comfortable, and now I'll do for you —till he comes back."

" Gracious me, it's nearly seven ! " Betsey, in whom nervous tension was giving rise to headache, suddenly exclaimed. She felt as if she must at once get out of this place, this environment which had so subtly instilled into her mind the idea which was perhaps going to turn out a hideous mistake. She must think, instead of feeling. While she was under

Mrs. Cox's roof, however, she continued to respond to the same sentimental stimulus.

"I will come to-morrow and fetch you all. Midday? Is that too soon? I have to settle my Georgie, you see? She can stay a day or two, or go at once, which I like."

"I can take up the place at once," said Mrs. Cox sturdily.

"Very well, then," Mrs. Altamont replied, fussily. "And you'll have the children dressed ready, won't you? Have you much to go on with—in the eating line, I mean?"

"Not much," said the other. "Nothing, in fact! But we can do."

Betsey laid five shillings odd on the table. "All I've got—keeping enough for my fare back," she said. "It'll perhaps get supper, and some breakfast. *Good-bye!*"

Mrs. Cox did not even reply to Betsey's perfunctory adieu. She looked mazed.

XV

Mrs. Altamont sat in the great red omnibus going back to town, and wondered what she had done. She was on her way home at least; she gloated on the thought of her last quiet evening in her own quiet house. For had she let loose the Furies? Had she done something mad, idiotic, and Scriptural, a Christian act of the extremest, foolishest charity? She felt now as one who has received extreme unction, bemused and yet equable. She was like those persons who give but seldom to offertories or subscription lists, and when they do give, give copiously. She seemed as if she had just attended a long and unwieldy church service —to have once for all penetrated to the very core of philanthropy, and she was bored and tired to death!

Yet she could have done no less. It had been, now that she came to disentangle motives, the sight of Little Katie which had so affected her and moved her to benevolence; Little Katie, who couldn't grow, who wasn't going to live, she felt sure of it, not even though they should begin feeding her well from now! . . .

Well, to carry on the religious metaphor, she had had her call, and she had responded to it. She was glad, she was changed, invigorated, uplifted, not with pride, but the pleasure of Doing, for once. This was Living indeed—squalid, utilitarian, grotesque, but still, Living.

She began to plan to make up her old winter jacket for Ada Cox, and there were some of Wilfrid's baby clothes that his mother had put aside long ago which might do for the

children ! In her mind, the scissors flew hither and thither—she heard the tearing of stuff. . . .

Later on, when the tram turned her out in Victoria Street, and the region grew less slummy, she began to think of Ernest Veere, and wondered if he would be pleased with her or no.

. . . . . .

Veere was not pleased, he thought the arrangement absurd. He used the time-honoured fetish word, quixotic, in this connection, and was vexed with Betsey for disdaining his proffered pecuniary assistance for Mrs. Cox. She tried to explain to him how she felt about it. In vain. His utilitarian negation of the picturesque as a factor in human affairs made him blind and deaf to her reasons for action, and they were, of course, purely sentimental, though she did not realise it.

But she could not deny that Ada Cox, so far, proved to be no cook. That was Ernest Veere's opportunity, eagerly grasped at. He wasn't going to have his beautiful friend starve and grow thin, at all events ! He insisted on taking her out to dinner nearly every night during the month that elapsed before Altamont mended and was able to be brought to the court to stand his trial.

It was over at last. Two days of squalid recapitulation of horrid details, a hint of female influence quashed at once, and then the verdict. At the Vienna Café, at the top of Leicester Square, where Ernest Veere brought Betsey to dine two days after the trial, she might, while she waited for him, read the questions of counsel, the judge's summing up, and the hopeless, inevitable verdict. Furthermore, poor Miss Altamont's disgraceful history in full, the sin of Sir Joris's youth lightly adumbrated. It was all there, in *The Sweep*. As for the bare facts of the case, she had no need to read them up, for Inspector Whortleberry made it his business to keep her informed. She had not been asked to appear, the

Veeres' solicitor, through Rose's intermission, had made all that easy for her. She was naturally supposed to be ill, prostrate, and quite unable to leave her sofa.

That was why she met him at obscure places like this. When he was too busy to motor out to fetch her, she was not too proud to arrive first at the rendezvous and wait for him ; their camaraderie was perfect.

On the white tablecloth beside her lay one or two of the daily papers, mounted on wooden frames for reading, like horn books of old. The large catchy headlines of *The Sweep* caught her eye. She was able to read there, " The Convict Altamont," and " The Condemned Man's Health," while " Altamont in Prison " stared at her from another sheet.

She could have asked the waiter to remove them if she had been inclined, but that might have attracted attention to herself, and revealed her identity, which she had taken the greatest pains, short of positively cloistering herself, to conceal. Besides, she did not care much, she had grown used to the impact of the shocks dealt her by sensation-mongers on placards and posters. There was, indeed, only one form of headline that she had, from the peculiarities of the case, been spared, " Strange Development." Wilfrid's counsel naturally was debarred from that line of defence—there *could* be nothing new.

His solicitor, paid by Rose Veere, had she but known, was trying to bring him off on the plea of insanity. She herself had been questioned, but she had not chosen to contribute anything to this charitable theory. No, Wilfrid, to her knowledge, had never been strange in manner, or done anything particularly perverse until now. She knew of nothing, and the removal of the other witness, his mother, by death, had left her the sole depository of the previous facts of his life. Ada Cox had not even been called.

The waiter removed the papers ; a client wanted them. A young man behind her was even then hanging up his hat,

he came round the corner of the coat-stand to their table. It was Veere, who smiled, as he always did when he saw Betsey again. The waiter hovered over him as he sat down—

"Two dozen oysters. Poulet Paprika. Pommes Sautées. Omelette au Rhum—or will you have Kirsch? For two. And bring the wine card, please."

"How are you?" he addressed himself to her. "Why wouldn't you come out with me yesterday?"

"Because of Ada."

"Your cook?" scornfully.

"Yes," she smiled, "and a bad one at that."

He interrupted her. "One minute! Champagne?"

"No, not to-day."

"Oh, yes, do you good. I want some." He pointed to a number on the card. "A pint of that." The man departed. "Now! Do you mean that Ada took it conventionally?"

"Well, the morning of the day on which you get the news of your husband's condemnation is bound to be a little upsetting—to her at any rate! He was *my* husband, of course, but she's the one that feels it. She couldn't, really, do a single thing all day—headache—sat in a corner with her apron over her head, woman-of-the-people fashion. I had to cook the dinner, and mind the children. Little Wilfrid, of course, chose the occasion to be more uproarious than usual. It took me all my time to keep him out of the copper. Georgie had come in to do some washing for me. Domestic detail! So you see, it would not have been possible for me to come, even if I had wanted!"

"Didn't you want?"

"No, I think not. I'm not a monster. It would have seemed too callous. But I don't pretend that I want him to get off. Ada, of course, does."

"I suppose he was fairly kind to her?"

"He doesn't seem to have knocked her about. She's got no marks, anyway."

" You have ? "

" Oh, the usual scar. It was my own fault. You see I've got a tongue, unfortunately, and I used to let poor Wilfrid have it pretty hot sometimes. Ada noticed my cut the other day."

" And did you tell her who gave it to you ? "

" No. Poor old Ginger gets the credit of it. But I'm not sure she believed me. She is quiet, but she's got a lot of elementary wisdom and a sort of doggy instinct that goes right, sometimes. She is rather jealous of me still. She is always trying to find out if Wilfrid and I got on together, and when I do my best to let her understand that she was his first and only love, she resents that on his account, and implies that I neglected my wifely duties."

" You did, thank God ! And sent him to her, an inferior article. She or her like was his true mate. They were probably very happy together. If she had had enough money to run the show, he would have stayed at home, lived on her, and let my uncle alone. She knew how to manage him. Why wasn't she tied to him instead of you ? That's the irony—the pity of it ! Why weren't you like her—and she Altamont's widow ? "

" You wouldn't have cared to be my friend then."

" On the contrary, I'd have married you—if you'd only been his mistress, instead of his wife. That's another thing, and fatal ! "

It was not Betsey's way to check and annoy him in the full flush of his charming arrogance and egoism by representing to him the possibility of a difference of opinion. She let him take it for granted that she would have accepted his offer if he had seen his way to make it. The thing could never be put to the test, as he said. And she had plans. She wanted to keep him in a good humour. Wilfrid was as good as dead. The plea of insanity which was his only line of defence had failed. His wife, and only his wife, could have substantiated

it; and she had refused, tacitly, to lie to save his life. She showed Veere the trend of her thoughts by her question.

"Don't you think that if the relations of a criminal help the lawyers to trump up the plea of insanity and invent all sorts of strange, mad things that he has done in the past to save him, that, when they succeed in proving it, they ought to be liable to prosecution?"

"How so?"

"Because if they do get him off so, they establish the fact that they were all the time harbouring a madman, and should have had him examined and shut up before he did any mischief!"

"I certainly agree with you. It's a good point. Many more people would get hanged, though, and Broadmoor would be emptied. Well, where shall we go to-night? There's a splendid play at the Shaftesbury—oh, I forgot!"

"No, let's go to it; I have no feeling of that kind."

"All right. I'll go and pay."

She dropped an enormous veil with large velvety spots over the features she was interested in hiding from the British Public. It would interfere with her plans should her face become public property. Neither was it good for Veere to be seen too much about with her. They went to the pit of the theatre.

Since her husband's definite condemnation, Betsey, confronted with the one great issue of her life, looked facts full in the face, and formed a distinct plan of action. She meant to confide in this young man, who had elected to be her friend, and beg for his co-operation. He was the dearest boy in the world, the cleverest, the most generous, a young man with a future, though he was consecrating the present to her, the wife of a condemned murderer, and a woman older than himself. But not for long now. To-night after the play and supper he would motor her back and she would tell him what she meant to do.

She had no fear of him. She dreaded no cheaply audacious enterprises on his part. Yet she knew well enough that he admired her. She would not have cared to be with him otherwise, she could not have been such a thorough companion to a man who did not desire her as a woman. She supposed him to be not entirely proof against the subtle whet of sex, although he showed himself so superior to the vulgar trivialities of flirtation. Against the big guns and forceful batteries of passion, her want of any deep feeling for him made her safe, and she conceived that he would use no other. A queer, deep, concentrated nature his, though outwardly easy-going, negligent, and trivial. So she thought of him in the comparatively brief moments devoted by her to the consideration of his character. She was, for the moment, full of *The Lyons Mail.*

"This is an old-fashioned play! Murderers don't seem to get found out now like that. There's no poetic justice in real life."

"Because miscreants have learned not to give themselves away. They avoid committing that one little bit of idiocy that makes the whole world kin and themselves discovered. They don't neglect the smaller precautions—I suppose it's the result of the capital Board School training we give them?"

"Yes; we teach them to criticise the Bible and to join their flats, and then when they are old they do not depart from it. Do you think Wilfrid meant to shoot your uncle?"

"He took his pistols out with him, didn't he? Were they new?"

"He had had them for years! I missed them, and at first it worried me, and I didn't tell Miss Altamont. Then I made up my mind that he had taken them out of bravado. He meant to threaten—a man armed is always more persuasive. I'll tell you what I think. No one heard exactly what they said to each other, but my idea is, he begged for money."

"You said so in court."

"And threatened to blow out his own brains if he was refused. Sir Joris was a brave man; I expect he first shrugged his shoulders and suggested a strait waistcoat. That would infuriate Wilfrid and suggest to him a change of plan. It drove him mad, in fact, and he pulled the trigger at Sir Joris. The shooting at himself was after pure remorse."

"My dear friend, aren't you rather morbid?"

"No, the opposite to morbid—healthy. Death isn't so terrible to perfectly well people."

"A good digestion, in fact, can deal even with a horrible murder, and make it into chyle."

"Well, I do think it's physical weakness makes one shrink so from the idea of death—one's own or other people's. If a cook wasn't healthy she'd loathe—or enjoy too much—drawing a turkey. And animals can go on feeding, cropping grass beside a comrade that's dying under the most disgusting conditions——"

"I've seen Dobrée once, staying at my uncle's, jab at a hunted otter with her parasol and spoil its nose—add to its last grunting agonies! I've seen her. Yes, I've seen her."

"She has no imagination, I suppose?"

"No more have I, but I couldn't stand that. I didn't say any more to the girl all day. . . . She's up there, now, in a box! Do you see?"

"How like you to keep it dark all through the first act! Has she seen us—you, I mean?" Betsey whispered excitedly.

"I shouldn't think so. She would never look for me here, in the pit!"

"No, no, of course not!" she said sarcastically. After a moment's deliberation—"I see her quite well. She's not so pretty as I thought. She's too steely."

"Say aluminium?"

"I'm disappointed in her, anyway. She's the sort of woman I'd have expected to be soft, and sweet—born in the purple as she is!"

"If the purple isn't lined with ermine it's no good. The Angernounes are not well off!"

"What do you call not well off?"

"Paupers at two thousand a year. But old Angernoune's got a big estate to keep up."

"Why should he keep it up? Let him cut it up into small holdings."

"And the ancestral mansion, that James the Fourth slept in on the night before Flodden?"

"Make it into a museum!"

XVI

"Oh, do give me something to give that poor child!" she begged, as they came out of the theatre, and were at once beset by a shivering specimen of organised London misery.

"I will not. You should never give in the street."

"Oh, but it's genuine. Look! He doesn't even beg."

"Best draw of all! Do come on, dear."

"All right!" She hastily slipped her fine scarf that he had given her from her neck and wound it deftly round that of the boy, flashing back her pretty defiance of the questioner of the morality of charity. He only smiled.

"It won't matter. I'm not a bit hurt. Though why you should disregard *me* on the subject—! I was my uncle's almoner. I dispensed his charities!"

Crossing the strip of pavement on their way to the motor they passed the series of wet posters laid in the mud with stones apposed at all four corners to keep them down. The chief item of news was, "Altamont's Letter to His Wife!"

"Yes," said she, "that came just before I started. Ada's got it now, wearing it next her poor heart."

"How could you let her?"

"She wanted it. She didn't see through it. It's just conventional—dictated by the prison chaplain, I should think."

"Well, you *are* a queer mixture!" he said, regarding her half kindly, half cynically. They were rolling along now smoothly towards Wimbledon—the chauffeur knew he need not put in top speed.

"How am I?"

"Full of misplaced charity and whimsical hardnesses."

"Look here!" She turned to him solemnly. "You like me to be natural, you encourage me to talk quite freely to you, don't you? . . . But if I had to fag to sham sensibility, I tell you, I wouldn't be with you in these days at all! I would refuse myself to you as I do to the others, the Wimbledonians. They all come bothering, one after another, and I hear that they are all down on me now because I go about with you and won't let them see how I am bearing it. I am bearing it too well, I know. It's indecent. I'm supposed to be broken with shame and grief. But why should I be bowed down with shame for the act of a man in whom I have no part, with whose doings I am not in any way connected, just because I once was fool enough to go and have my union with him blessed? It wasn't even a real union—as I see it. I can't possibly feel sorry because I am going to be freed from such vermin! That's how I think of him—perhaps you didn't know it? Ada is properly broken-hearted—she is my vicar. She works it off for me, and you I let see me as I am, and how I feel—and I don't feel conventionally!"

She flung herself back in the car, spent with her tirade. Ernest Veere looked at her curiously, as at a lovely being of another species.

"I often wonder what you really do feel?" he said doggedly.

"Oh, man, can't you see? As Christian did when the burden rolled off his back!"

"Yet you married the fellow—for love, I suppose?"

"Nay, for love of his mother, I think. I don't fall in love easily, for all I am so friendly with men!"

There was a long pause. Ernest Veere looked her in the face. His gaze seemed to fall away from her unreceptive sweetness. He sighed. "Well, you are very charming and life is very complicated. I love to hear what you make of it

all. I can make nothing of it except that anything so adorably natural and breezy *must* be right! In your heart, Betsey, it is always spring-cleaning—one smells the smell of antiseptic soap, and knows the windows are open! One touch of spite or cattiness, taken in conjunction with your eyes, and you'd be a minx, any one can see that!"

"I'm not a minx!" said she gravely. "Never was. And now—— Say a nun, walled up in a cell, buried alive, paralysed! But no more—no more! I see daylight——"

"Through a prison window!"

"I am not going to let myself think of that," she said brutally. "I only know I shall be a widow on the twentieth of this month, and then—I'll make great differences—great changes, do you understand? There's such a lot of life in me."

"There is, indeed. Don't I know it! But you can't do so very much. He has spoiled your chances."

"No, not quite! I won't let him. I mean to try to begin again. That's why I have been so careful to keep my face out of the papers. No one out of Perton—the great public, I mean, knows what "the wife of Altamont" is really like. Can't I go to a new country and begin afresh?" She seized his hand. "Ernest, can't I?"

"Can't you? Yes, why not? I suppose you can if you care to!"

He was suddenly cast down. She was too eager to notice it, but went on fiercely:

"Of course I care. Yes, I am determined to pull it off."

"*You* can pull off anything if you have a mind. Go to America, marry again, even——" He laughed harshly.

"Yes, I had thought of that," she said seriously.

He started.

"That's what I mean. I had rather be married than not, and to a good man this time. I don't absolutely hate men, as you know!" she smiled. "Now, listen. I should start with a sort of what do you call it—a *nom-de-guerre*."

"A *nom de* Saturday to Monday, I suppose!"

"Are you being quite nice? I mean, he wouldn't know who I was till we got to know each other, and then, of course, I'd tell him the truth about myself. Out there, on another continent, it wouldn't sound so bad. I should start quite fair, and penniless, for I'll leave the lease of the house and a hundred a year to Ada."

"And how do you mean to get to America?"

"Through you, of course. I should ask you to give me my passage as a parting gift. It wouldn't be so very expensive, for I shouldn't want a return ticket, you know."

"And supposing I refused?"

"You wouldn't. Why should you? You're rich—and if you weren't, I could always pay you back."

"When you got the man!" He hesitated, ashamed. "No, Betsey, that isn't the reason why I should refuse to frank you across. And I certainly should refuse——"

"To help me——?"

"To help you to leave me. Yes. For I had hoped——"

"What?" she asked sharply.

"That you would stay with me."

"Marry you, do you mean?"

"How could I? The wife of my uncle's murderer! It would ruin me!"

"It would. I shouldn't think of it. Neither would I allow you to ruin me!"

"But——"

"You mean that there's nothing to ruin. That I'm done for already, because of Wilfrid?"

"I don't see what's left for you, frankly, but the protection and care of some decent man, as the world goes. The widow of a criminal——"

"I don't see why because I have been the wife of one beast that I should sink into becoming the mistress of another!"

"But that's the long and the short of it, I'm afraid," he said. "I may be wrong——"

"Of course you're wrong. And another thing—you don't love me."

"I believe I do. Honestly, I do. I guessed it and I began to be quite sure when you talked of going to America!"

"That was just temper."

"No, Betsey, I assure you. Dear woman, you have wound yourself round my heart in these days—I am getting to feel that I cannot do without you. I can't bear to think of letting go your hand, or having to hold it across continents. That's why I got so sulky when you spoke of leaving Europe. All this, I know, can't go on for ever—our surreptitious meetings, our little jaunts, our good times together, but something might have been arranged, not necessarily derogatory to you?"

"I should have liked that still less," said she, frankly. "Don't you see, I want to launch my poor little boat out into the full stream of life again, not to get stuck in some wretched backwater or other. You don't understand me a bit."

"On the contrary, Betsey, I do. I appreciate you as no one else ever did. I appreciate you so much I feel that I can't bear to part with so much excellence. Curse that man—your husband! Why couldn't he have kept quiet!"

"Then I shouldn't have been a widow at all."

"Well, simply committed suicide, then—ended his useless life without getting mixed up with *my* family. Betsey, I've never wanted anything as much as I want you in my whole life."

"That's not saying so very much if you pretend you love me. But I know all the time that you only want to keep a soothing companion by you for the present, while you're intending by and by to marry Lady Dobrée and consolidate your race."

"I had thought of it," he said simply. "It was a fine plan.

But it may never come off. And I am utterly upset and miserable at what you have told me. Betsey, you can't—you can't be so hard upon me after all we have been to each other these days. Will you give me a kiss ? "

" Certainly," she said. " You have been very good."

She held her soft cool cheek to him, and a loosened bow of her hair fell over his forehead. . . . He breathed heavily, and touched her hair, like a blind man feeling his way. . . .

" I shall never kiss Dobrée like that."

" Don't marry her then. That's my advice to you. Take it. It's good. Here we are at my diggings. Good-bye. You're the nicest man I've ever met—so far—but you're younger than me, remember, and I'm quite young still." She moved to get out.

He put his hand on the door.

" Betsey, if I could marry you, you'd stay ? "

" I believe I would. I'm very fond of you. And I am so keen now on respectability, and above-boardness. Marriage with you would be that—perfectly all right, I'm sure. But you can't. . . . I'm so sick of grovelling here in the suburbs, hiding and pottering and wasting my life on church bazaars and dress and talk—and ugly nothings. I feel as if I must get out of it somehow, get into the light if I can. Marrying you would give me that, wouldn't it ? But—the other thing you proposed would mean going back into the dusk and the gloom, or rather, staying where I am already ! You'd hide me, and I want to be produced."

Veere was silent. The moon rays broke faintly through the glass panel of the car. The chauffeur's back as he sat there, impassible, waiting, was a solid screen of discretion. . . .

She laid her hand on his shoulder.

" Dear, nice boy, don't be angry with me——"

" What for ? " he muttered.

" For being so set up, for presuming to want to make my own life my way, not yours—having the cheek to refuse you !

Don't visit it on me. Come and take me out again. See me through this. I am all alone, and it's rather awful, although I talk big. Ada's not company. The others avoid me, I've grown to look to you for—such a lot of things. Don't fail me. . . . Let me be myself. . . . I don't love you, not even as much as I thought I did. I knew it when you kissed me."

"Ah, but——"

He came out of his sullen fit, caught her to him, strained her close, murmured soft things to her, called up all the resources and furiously stoked the fires of potential passion. It was a moment that could not last without real emotion on both sides to back it. He released her, and her eyes, that had been closed and flattened in the heavy fur collar of his coat, opened again on to the moonlit panes, and the rain pools, like flakes of silver, flashing in the roadway in front. . . .

"You see, there's no doubt about my loving you!" he said, as calm, smiling, gently breathing, exhibiting only the faintest signs of discomposure, she came out of his arms.

"But what about me?" she said sadly, getting out of the car.

XVII

Lady Dobrée de Saye owned a little flat in town, the rent of which was paid by her god-parent, the Duke of Lax, and lived in it with the slavish little companion that her mother chose for her. This was the condition of her freedom. The earl, her father, lived at Low Water, far away in the north of England. His dull, but worthy, punctilious and psalm-singing *milieu* was intolerable to his high-spirited daughter, who had once threatened to run away with her brother's tutor, unless she were permitted to live her own life. The permission was given. She lived it now conveniently—with her family's forced aid and help. The ancestral oaks of Angernoune were gradually being carted away to pay for her keep. Lady Angernoune's toilette was sacrificed to her fancies. There was not a numbered *edition de luxe* she didn't order or a Paris model off the nail when she had a mind thereto. Lady Angernoune in her remote northern fastness dressed worse than the housekeeper who showed the state rooms, to pay the bill for it, and to supplement her daughter's exiguous allowance. Lady Dobrée's account was always overdrawn. The impoverished parent birds yearned that she should marry, but not a tutor. They fondly imagined that this result would be attained if, taking her strong character into account, they allowed the young lady to compass her destiny herself. Dobrée's head was screwed on the right commercial way, she used her title wisely enough, and at home they had heard of Ernest Rose Veere. So her schemes were furthered by her family. The rich Duke of Lax, who

wrote books to prove that his vast estates in Somersetshire brought him in nothing, made his niece, yearly, a handsome present of money, which she usually anticipated, and lent her his box at the Opera pretty often in the season; but that was all he could do for her, she knew. He meant to leave her nothing to speak of, for he had too many sons.

Dobrée was only four-and-twenty, a slight, tall stripling of a girl, with smooth, quite ordinary hair, and grey inexpressive eyes. Her length of limb would have fitted her for the saddle, but her father could not afford to mount her. She swam, fenced, and danced in London, but at other people's expense. She used her position for all it was worth, her title procured her her creature comforts and helped her to "nobble" even bourgeois celebrities, for whom she had a mysterious unracial weakness. Those persons of her own station whom she neglected were of opinion that poor Dobrée was running rather to seed in London. She would pitch her set so many pegs lower than that to which her rank and name entitled her. The reason was this, that she loved to bask in the atmosphere of flattery, as it were a savoury joss-stick burned in the room she occupied. Adulation, no matter from what motive it sprang, was the breath of life to her, and she was too simple to realise that she could be of any use to people, and that the oldest name in England had its magic apart from the social merits of its possessor. Though with tradespeople it practically sent up her bills: in society it made her a *persona grata*, so that she need not patronise the butcher or the fishmonger who overcharged her, but could dine and lunch out free every night of her life.

Presuming on her Norman blood, she did as she liked, and went where she liked. She trifled with morbidity, she paltered with perversity, she entertained pathetic blackmailers and amiable adventuresses, and remained what she was, intrinsically, a simple, egotistic, sweet-natured English girl.

Ethel Taylor, her unpaid companion, was respectable,

Scotch, a poor relation, and knew Dobrée through and through. She was over fifty, a feather bed, a mat, boiled rag, all of which engaging appellations her young charge called her in turn, nagging the rag, trampling on the mat, and hugging the feather bed, as the fancy took her.

The real society chaperon of Lady Dobrée was the tall, faded, handsome Lady Maude Erskine-Robertson, who had passed through the Divorce Court, but through the right lobby, the one on the side of the angels, so she said. It must have been so; it was She who had divorced Him, or the Angernounes would never have allowed their girl to go out with her. The two went everywhere together, and left "Effel" at home with the dogs and the cat. Effel patiently combed the cat and tied a blue bow in the dog's fringe and sat the evening through, knitting things for Dobrée. She was not allowed to knit when Dobrée was at home—"It looks so smug and companiony!"

When there was a dinner party in the flat, Effel went to spend the evening with her sister, who was nurse-housekeeper to old Lord Druid at Garsington House. Lady Dobrée knew this sister well and went to see her sometimes, to please Effel. She liked to be kind and please people when it was fairly convenient. But Lady Maude was always commandeered to chaperone Lady Dobrée on official social occasions. She was nothing loath. She drifted in one evening of a dinner party five minutes before the prescribed hour of arrival, so as to discharge her duties. The front of her gown was a marvel of alternate reticence and revelation. She was never *décolletée*, it might have been better, from the point of view of obvious morality, if she had been. She managed, as Lady Dobrée said, to be "highly indecent" instead! She had reduced her weight to less than seven stone to suit the exiguities of her banana-skin, and could scarcely sit down in her suggestive costume.

There was time for a few questions.

"Who's your sixth?"

"I asked Ernest Veere over the telephone."

"Isn't it rather soon?"

"Well, he's accepted. It's only a small dinner, and dear Ernest is very modern."

"Oh, very!" Lady Maude yawned. "Do you know that he's spending his whole time, when he's not giving evidence or paying estate duty, with the wife of the man who murdered his uncle?"

"I like that."

"You would."

"I felt at once, when I met him—where did I meet him?—that he would amuse me."

"And marry you?"

"That too, perhaps! Don't be nasty, Maude. It's the best thing I can do, on the whole. I accepted the situation, practically, when I went and stayed at the Veere place in Surrey, and got them to have Ernest up at Low Water. Oh, dear! It was rather a trial! But when once I get over his, what shall I call it, his expectedness—he's not a bit artistic or cultured, is he——?"

"He's pure commercial. That's it. And his manners are a little too good, and too much of them——"

"That's when he talks to us. We're not his world, Maude, and he knows it. I wonder, don't you, how he talks to this Mrs. Altamont?"

"Fried fish and onions style! Very pally! Says whatever comes into his head, or nothing at all, as the case may be. Long silences. I don't suppose he rattles on to amuse her, he keeps that for society, puts it on the moment the man at the door takes his coat and passes him in to us. *We* don't know where these flies that amuse us have been buzzing. I often think we deserve to be strangled in our beds by the people we pick up in the street. We never think of asking for references!"

"We don't ask for bread because we know we'll be given a stone! References are so easily faked, and it's worse to get caught by an adventurer," said Lady Dobrée. "Now I *know* Ernest's trade. The Veeres were originally Dutch, I know that too. The old man had an estate at Veere in Holland."

"That he probably bought cheap to *motiver* the name. Trade has all sorts of dodges. . . . Oh, and let me tell you not to talk to Lee-Brice about his last book, for it's a sore subject. It's been forbidden and the publisher has undertaken to burn all the existing copies."

"What, *The Red Corpuscles!* Oh, how I do sympathise!"

"With the Vigilance people?"

"No, with him. I think it's a wonderful book!"

"If you young girls didn't take to books like that so furiously," said Lady Maude, "there'd be a chance of their being allowed to stay on the counter for the people they really do good to."

"What good can they do the old stagers? It's us girls that want telling. Shut up, Maude—here's some one! . . . Rose Veere. I know his voice. I mean to rag him about last night. I was at the Shaftesbury with the Vallances and he——"

The door opened and Veere was announced.

"Am I the first?" he asked, looking round the room.

"The first shall be last," said Dobrée. "We want you to take us out to supper after the people have gone."

"I don't think I can. I am starting for the north at eight o'clock to-morrow morning, and I want just to taste my bed for an hour or two."

"Is that sincere?"

"Sincere that I love my bed? I adore it."

"I believe you sincerely adore something else!" she said, giving rein to her congenital taste for the very simplest forms of chaff. She added: "If the husband gets off, he'll bring an action for divorce!"

Lady Maude laughed, and arranged her feet on the footstool.

"Why isn't her portrait in the papers?" pursued the eager young girl, enjoying herself.

"Because she won't have it."

"Why? Is she ugly?"

"No."

"Does she look a lady?"

"That I won't tell you. It's the most descriptive description you can give, and some of these days you'll be seeing her with me."

"I did. Last night. Saw you sitting in the pit of the Shaftesbury with the wife of your uncle's murderer!"

"Dobrée, don't be a brute!" murmured the chaperon.

"Maude, you know you're enjoying hearing me heckling him. We're so modern. Ernest doesn't mind it. He's modern, too."

"Don't mind me, Lady Maude," said Veere cheerfully, "I'll answer any questions—decent questions, that is!"

"Well then, tell me, is she very much upset?"

"Rather upset—and very busy, as the schoolboy wrote, when he was assisting his widowed mother with her replies to condolences. She—well, you are both so modern you won't be shocked if I tell you—the wife of Altamont is placidly, quietly happy, delighted to be a widow. The man was a regular beast, he drank and struck her and was unfaithful to her, and she's glad to be rid of him. She's modern, too."

Veere rose—they all rose—to greet the famous author, Lee-Brice, the distinguished-looking man who wrote undistinguished novels about common people, and visited with the pick of the aristocracy. He was tall and rather grey, with a black pointed beard, this Don Quixote, who had tilted, now successfully, now unsuccessfully, against the windmills of Wellington's and Mudie. Fastidiousness was the note of his face, his small imperial suggested early days spent in

diplomacy. Lady Maude had a great weakness for him, as, indeed, she had for all handsome men, and monopolised him for the moment. Veere and his young hostess were let alone.

"So that's your new toy-author?" he said, alluding to Lee-Brice.

"Not much of a toy, is he? More like a greyhound," she said. "He's splendid, I think. I say, do tell me what your Mrs. Altamont is going to do with herself, after——"

"After her husband is hanged," said he calmly. "Well, she has her plans, like the rest of us."

"Are you in them?"

"No, I regret to say. She is going to America, where she intends to remarry. No one need know her story out there, you see."

"That's the meaning of the mammoth veil in court——"

"Precisely. Now talk to Lee-Brice, he's got something to say to you."

. . . . .

"I saw you in my part of the world the other day, Lady Dobrée," said the author, approaching, as Ernest Veere left the field clear for him.

"In Mount Street?"

"No, in Wimbledon. I went there to finish a novel—I can't work in town, with the telephone going constantly and people calling. When I have something to finish I take a room somewhere in the suburbs, and work hard at it, seeing no one, and leaving my secretary at home to open my letters. Anywhere to avoid the advantages of civilisation!"

"Oh, yes," said she, "I remember. I went down to Wimbledon once to see Effel's sister, who's companion to old Lord Druid at Garsington House. And oh, I must tell you—you can put it in a story—I had such an adventure!"

She sat down, and motioned him to a place on the ottoman beside her. She settled down to her story-telling with glee,

for like most amateurs she took a pride in furnishing reluctant authors with "copy."

"Well, it was like this. Suddenly I saw a naked child run screaming out of a house, and down the drive and a bit of the road, and an awful-looking woman with a beard run out after it and catch it and take it in. It yelled then like fury; and went on yelling inside. I thought it was my duty, so I rang the bell and gave the girl my card, said I was an inspector —Cruelty to Children, you know—and that I *must* positively come in and make inquiries. So she let me in, and they were really quite nice in a fussy, lumbering, suburban sort of way. There was a tea-fight going on, but the woman of the house took me up and explained. The child was having his bath, and he got naughty and ran out just as he was, and the old Nanny—she had a beard but she was all right, I found, and adored children—had to go and get him back, but hadn't liked to disturb the tea-party. Wouldn't *you* have thought it your duty to inquire? And all I said—I was very cunning —was that I had heard the screams—and so I did, for all the time we were talking he was yelling fit to take the roof off. Oh, here are the Blessingtons! Now we can go in to dinner. You take me."

XVIII

Lady Dobrée was too egotistic and erratic to be a good hostess. She made no effort to lead the conversation, not even in her own direction. It glanced on and off the Altamont trial several times during the meal. Veere sat impassible, like a good boy, eating his dinner, which was neither well cooked or well served. Betsey, with Ada's help, could manage to give him a better.

"Did you hear?" said Lord Blessington, whose approaching senility was indicated more or less by the fact that he could not keep off the subject connected, and painfully so, with one of the guests, "that one of the halls had offered the wife of Altamont two hundred a week just to appear and sing one song?"

"Is she a frump or a beauty?" asked Lee-Brice.

"Very fine hair, I believe. *The Sweep* had a whole column about her. She lives somewhere about Wimbledon in an old Jacobean manor-house—romantic, and so on. They gave some photos of it. The article was in Monday's issue, I think."

"I didn't see it," said Veere. "Who do you say wrote it?"

"E. Simpson or E. Simmons—a name like that. A local authoress, I expect. Some one who'd got a down on the poor little woman, I imagine."

Veere made a mental note to advise Mrs. Altamont to beware of Evangeline, but forgot. He was interested in a talk he was having with the intensely versatile author about archæology. Lee-Brice, among his thirty-seven literary

nurslings, numbered one book of which the scene was laid in Early Saxon times.

"There's an old burying-ground on the links near a place of mine I should like you to see," Veere was saying, with all the zest of a Wardour Street shopman, who has got his lesson well by heart. "We'll get it opened. I'll give any one leave who'll undertake it, and pay the damage. There's all sorts of traditions about it."

"What period?"

"They're pre-Christian burials, I have been told by the local antiquary. We find bits of lead coffin now and again, and sometimes a whole jawbone and femurs and tibias. The teeth are as white as milk when the ladies have picked them with a bonnet-pin."

"The ladies!" said Dobrée. "Disgusting! It's bad enough to pick one's own teeth, but other people's——"

"Quite a fascinating occupation you'd find, if you were there. Come and do it, I say. It's at Angernoune."

"*My* ancestral home," said the young lady coolly.

"Your father sold it to my uncle, all fair and square," said Veere. "Forgive him for buying it, and come and entertain for me there this summer, and bring the present company. There are twenty-three bedrooms in the Dwelling House, and as many more in the Old Keep. I've no lady of my own family to entertain for me, except an old aunt who's doited, and says the wrong thing all the time."

"That's where you get it!" muttered Lady Maude, in a careless whisper.

"I don't mind coming," the girl said, in her harsh voice that could not adequately express the pleasure she felt at this decisive move on Mr. Veere's part. "But Maude must come and housekeep."

"Certainly," said that lady complacently. "I take housekeeping in my stride. I'll come, certainly, if the Blessingtons come too, and my cherubic latest—Lord Vallance!"

Long, long ago Lady Maude had taken Lord Blessington in that capacious stride of hers, that now included the boy Vallance. The Blessingtons accepted the invitation *con amore*. The wife's facile conjunction was easily forthcoming. "Dear Maude is so safe!" was the general opinion of her female contemporaries, victims some of them, *dans le temps*, of Lady Maude's Courts of Love that sat perpetually in Eccleston Square. She went always to fancy dress balls as the Comtesse de Champagne, and was admitted to have all the passions under her patronage. Veere obediently desired the company of Vallance of all things, Lee-Brice promised to give Lady Dobrée a fortnight in August, and amid jests and laughter the house-party for Angernoune was made up.

The Blessingtons made their adieux with Lady Maude and Lee-Brice, and all four packed into the tiny self-working lift.

"By the way," Lee-Brice said to Lord Blessington, "I didn't like to mention it before that young fellow, but there is some talk about a petition on foot to the Home Secretary for Altamont. I understand Veere is interested in the wife?"

"Oh, not to that extent!" said Lady Maude. "He's romantic, that's all." The lift bumped.

Her smile was subtle as she bade the author good-bye in the hall, and got into the Blessington carriage.

"Romantic? Veere?" she said. "He's going in for Dobrée, that's a fact. What else could that invitation to pose as hostess at Angernoune mean?"

"It might mean that he and the Altamont had had a row," said Lord Blessington. "But we shall see."

"At Angernoune. It will be great fun!" said the vivacious lady.

. . . . .

"Don't go!" said Lady Dobrée to Veere, when the two young people were left alone in the warm little flat. "Sit

down and talk. Effel's come in; I heard her. I say, do you really want me to come to Angernoune and bring all my friends ? "

" Yes, unless you think they are too great and good for me."

" Don't say things like that, Ernest. But I could not help wondering a little if you asked me for myself."

" Why else should I ask you ? "

" Oh, I don't know." She was ashamed to taunt him with the truth, that she had thought him pushing, and made a hasty accusation, which had, however, some slight validity in her mind.

" I thought, perhaps, the wife of Altamont might have huffed you ? "

" Don't talk about her, it bores me."

She tossed her head. " But why should I be so careful not to bore you ? You don't mind boring me ? "

" I'm sorry. How ? "

" You don't behave nicely to me—at least not as I should like you to."

" Tell me how you'd like me to, and I'll try, for you're a good fellow, Dobrée. And when you plead, you are very pathetic, because your voice doesn't exactly lend itself——"

" There you are ! What a way to talk to a woman ! Telling her straight out that her voice is unsympathetic ! Voice isn't everything ! "

" Your only weapon, no. You've got others, and, as I say, when you soften——"

" But your voice now, Ernest—I suppose you wouldn't be bothered, talking to me, but your voice never has the sort of inflections that I thought men's voices had, talking to women they admire and desire, when they are alone with them—— ? "

" Why, you said Miss Taylor was in ! "

" Yes, but safely tucked up in bed by now."

" I had better go, then ! "

She laughed stridently. He rose, and looked at her dissatisfied face, and was touched by it. True, Betsey had huffed him, and he was tired to-night. He spoke roughly, and that she somehow liked.

" Look here, Dobrée, do you want to make me want to make love to you ? For I tell you honestly, I am not going to. It wouldn't be good for you, you aren't actuated by the right feminine motives. You're not really a flirt, my dear, and the pose doesn't suit you at all. You are a creamy English girl——"

" Teha ! " She turned away.

" And to hear you talking away about desire ! It's not a word for you to use ; not your line at all. It's as if an aspic were to try to be a mayonnaise. And I'm in a rather bad temper to-night——"

" I see you are. Good night."

" Good night, my dear. I daresay we shall——" he stopped.

" What ? Say it."

" Marry each other all right in the end, that is to say, if you care to when the time comes."

" I shall never marry you till I have seen the green light in your eyes."

" What are you talking about, you perverse child ? "

" Something Maude said—connected with that word you disapproved of my using so much. Good night ! "

" Use it as much as you like, but not to me," said Veere good-humouredly. " You don't come in there with me. Good night ! I've enjoyed myself very much, thank you." He kissed her hand.

" So glad ! " They both laughed.

" You should learn not to stick your knuckles out so when they kiss your hand ! " said he, as he left the room.

. . . . .

"He meant when I am the wife of a Cabinet Minister and receive foreign notabilities—Lady Dobrée Veere, *At Home!*" Dobrée told Effel, waking her up, and relating the experiences of the evening. "But I must say I feel a fool when some one is kissing my hand, and I am thinking of all sorts of different things, as I look out over his bald parting——"

"Mr. Veere isn't bald," remarked Effel sleepily.

"No, but he's the kind of man who soon will be, if he works so hard, and runs the wife of Altamont at the same time. He makes, but he's not made of, cast-iron. Effel, laugh!" she insisted nervously.

"Effel" obediently laughed.

"As for Mrs. A., I've fought her and I've beaten her, and I feel proud, for she's what they call desirable, I'm sure. I teased Ernest about it to-night, when he was courting me in his usual casual fashion. Is he cold—or am I?"

"I hardly know what you mean?" said Effel.

"No, poor dear. Well, the fact is, I love fifty men better than Ernest, in that way, even the author who dined to-night! But alack, they have none of them sixty thousand a year!"

"Has Mr. Veere?"

"More. And it will take it all, all, to make him go down."

"But I thought your people——"

"Oh, they're all right. Father'll stop tree-cutting and mother will start her model dairy. And, of course, the Laxes and Ninians are quite aware which side of their bread isn't buttered. They don't want to go on keeping me. And they don't think I've got quite the right woman to go out with, and no more I have—I'm quite aware of that, but what have I to offer to a really nice woman of my own set? She wouldn't see it. Lady Maude's a bit off colour, but she's all I can get. And it's the Veeres and so on that she *can* introduce me to. That's the only chance of my going off, and down! Do you think I don't know that? I'm rather deep really; I go with

the tide. I go with Veere. Only I wish he'd take some lessons in the art of making love ! "

" He's such a nice-looking young man, I think ! "

" Dear old Effel ! " said her young charge sorrowfully, stooping down and kissing her. " Good night ! "

XIX

Mrs. Altamont was intent, all her faculties surrendered to the cutting out of a suit for little Wilfrid on the dining-room table in Worksop House—it was the only table in the house you could cut out on. Ada, from the adjoining kitchen, wandered in and out carrying, absently, various stained and sooty culinary implements backwards and forwards—a lovely scullion, for she had gained some weight and her complexion had improved since her domestication in Betsey's home.

"Ada, put that pan down—not here, silly girl; it's all black round the bottom—and catch me Billy. This is basted ready for him to try on. He's under the table with Ginger."

Mrs. Cox stooped under the table and addressed her apparently inanimate son.

"Come out, Billy! Come to your mammy!"

"Which one?" said Billy, with a mind to tease and procrastinate.

"This one!" said Mrs. Altamont sharply. "Come along, quick! I've no time to waste."

Billy was then temporarily arrayed in a sober, manly serge covering, held together precariously by scant white threads, and stood up in front of his own mother, whose secret ideal of clothes for her boy was that embodied in the picture "Bubbles." She murmured tamely, "He'll look quite the man in it!"

Mrs. Altamont's mouth was full of pins. Ada went on, whining:

"I wish his poor father could see him in it. Billy, don't you long to see Daddy again?"

"Don't," said Betsey, removing such pins from her lips as positively impeded speech, "don't work him up like that! What's the good of putting impossible ideas into the child's head?"

"Impossible ideas?" Ada stared.

"The idea that he'll see him again when he won't."

"My goodness, you *are* hard!"

"No, I'm not."

The eyes of Betsey filled with tears.

"Oh, yes, you're crying fast enough," Ada said resentfully. "But not for him. It's for yourself you're crying."

"Yes, for myself, and Billy, and you, for anybody but the man who's plunged us all into this for nothing!"

She threw down the large dressmaking scissors with a clash. Ada Cox stood up and arraigned her benefactress.

"For nothing! His children were starving and I told him so."

"Miss Altamont was going to do something."

"But she went and died first," Ada complained, sitting down and falling into her second fit of tears this morning. She generally had five or six. She fed and fostered her insurgent nerves with continual sluicings of tea; there were days when her usual allowance of sixteen cups was exceeded. She drank no spirits.

Mrs. Altamont swept the materials of Billy's suit off the table and began to sew, feverishly, inexpertly, but sturdily. Ada was ashamed. She rose and wiped her eyes on her apron.

"Look here, this is the way to nowhere. I'll go back to my work. Shall Billy stay with you?"

"Yes, I'll mind him. I'll take him for a walk as soon as I have got this put together, so that I don't lose all the pins."

She sat and worked. Her head, a shining platter, a disc of gold, was downcast, her cheek was flushed. The child played

happily at her feet. Presently there was a ring at the outer door bell.

Mrs. Altamont, without waiting for her hysterical cook, rose and admitted the friendly detective who had brought her the news of the crime in the first instance.

Inspector Whortleberry admired the wife of Altamont and was impressed by the dramatic circumstances of her case. His histrionic leanings were, however, a good deal modified by the life he led, and would never have betrayed him into a breach of discipline, though, indeed, the spectacle of the murderer's wife with the murderer's child by another woman on her knee, was stimulating and richer in suggestion than most of the usual combinations that came under his notice. Betsey knew exactly the state of his feelings about her, and manipulated them at her pleasure. She encouraged him to call often, and give her all the news she wanted.

"I have called to tell you, Mrs. Altamont, that there is going to be a petition signed and sent up to the Home Secretary."

"What for?" Her eyes grew round and strained; she suspended the play of her needle. "Run away to your mother, Billy, and tell her I sent you."

"It is a petition to commute the death sentence," the inspector said solemnly.

"Is that so?"

"Yes. It may be granted—we cannot tell. It depends on the list of names—and popular feeling is rather strong in his favour."

"I wonder why?"

"Well, you see, Mrs. Altamont, the attempt at suicide—"

"—Showed the purity of his intentions!"

"It showed the state of despair that the man was in. And then the doctors bringing him round—operating on him only to fit him to be hanged, after all, you see, it gets up a lot of sympathy in the public."

"The public doesn't reason——"

"No, Mrs. Altamont, we have to take that into account. But the present Home Secretary is a stern man—there ain't no nonsense about him. He doesn't take much count of petitions, especially those *The Sweep* gets up."

"My husband was once on the staff of that paper. . . . Well, thank you very much, Mr. Whortleberry, for coming here to tell me these things."

"Not at all, madam, I am very pleased to be of any use to you."

He was *distrait* and so was Mrs. Altamont. During the course of his last speech they had both heard a motor stop outside Worksop House, and both the inspector and Betsey knew who it was.

Whortleberry took his respectful leave of the enchantress.

He had come across Mr. Veere in Worksop House before; this made twice—it was custom, then! It was another aspect of the unconventionality that ran all through the Veere murder case.

He knew well enough that his news was unwelcome to Mrs. Altamont. Naturally so. The poor girl was young, handsome, and absolutely indifferent to her criminal husband. What was sport to the British public was death to her and her future. He also, for Mrs. Altamont's sake, rejoiced in the reputed severity and unyielding character of the Home Secretary of the day, which would impel him to reject the careless popular cry. Petitions like this go to the very root of human nature. It is as impossible to avoid inscribing one's name at the bottom of an appeal to mercy, as it is to refuse to put one's hand in one's pocket at Christmas in response to the prayers of indiscriminate, ill-judged charity.

. . . . .

"Well, Betsey, I'm back. Travelled all night——" Veere said, coming in rather boisterously.

" And have you pulled it off—what you went to do ? " she asked, making an effort of detachment.

" Yes. Done the deed—deal, I mean. I say," he grew serious, " have you seen the papers this morning—or did that stout beggar I met going out come to tell you ? It's not his business—but I suppose your eyes——"

" Don't, Ernest, he means to be kind. Yes, he told me—but he reassured me as well. He says it's most unlikely the Home Secretary will agree to it. I'm speaking low, because of Ada. I never know—she is so keenly interested, she listens——"

" Well, will you come for a spin in the car ? "

" Yes, if I may take the child. I promised him a walk."

" All right, I'll take you to Kensington Gardens."

" To Kensington, when we live on Wimbledon Common ? "

" Yes, and it is common to him. We'll buy him a boat and swim it on the Round Pond. Come on."

Betsey opened the door leading to the kitchen and called :

" Ada ! Mr. Veere is here. Send Billy along, will you ? "

Veere stooped and kissed the child, tweaking his " Bubble " frills. " You dear little figure of fun ! " he said. " I've no moustache for you to pull. Pity, isn't it ? "

" Daddy has a moustache. . . . I've only one daddy, and two mammys ! "

They dressed him between them and hustled him off, promising to buy him a little ship at the first shop they came to in Kensington. As they packed into the motor, Evangeline Simmons passed by and gawkily made some gesture between a familiar nod and a distant bow to Betsey, who pretended not to see it. She was not inclined to forgive Evangeline for the Interview in *The Sweep* just yet, though she fully admitted the terrible temptation to make capital out of a friend's woes that had been presented to a cynical young pauper of journalistic tendencies.

They stopped half-way at a fancy repository in West

Kensington to buy the little ship that Billy was clamouring for. A large printed paper was spread out on the counter, which the quick-eyed Betsey spied, and at once turned away from. The shopwoman, however, timidly presented it to Veere's notice.

"Petition to reprieve Altamont! Not I!"

"Perhaps the lady would like to sign it?"

"The lady does not approve of the object of the petition," Veere informed her off-handedly. "Are you aware that the man himself is not anxious to live? He tried to kill himself."

"Ah, but think of his poor wife?" said the shopwoman. "And her left with two little children!"

"You are misinformed," said Veere carelessly. "She has none."

The woman gave it up, and went for the change. Betsey nudged him. "Don't let us wait."

"We must, or she will begin to think things."

They lunched at the hotel overlooking Kensington Gardens, and then sailed the little ship on the Round Pond for half an hour in such a thoroughly half-hearted and ineffective manner that Billy was disgusted, and said he didn't care about sailing his new boat at all, but wanted to sit down under the tree on a penny chair with green slats instead.

"It's too cold!" was Betsey's curt reply to his petition. "We had better be getting home." Her temper was rising. She muttered, "I don't know whatever your mother will say to me, you've gone and messed your nice suit all over with water——"

"Betsey! Betsey!" objected Veere good-humouredly. "Here are you crabby—when you have a good right to be tragic! It's the sign of a healthy nature, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes." She flew out, pettish as a child. "I'm healthy—damn healthy—but just now I'm so tired I can hardly stand!"

"We will sit down for a minute, then," he said. "And

please both the children. It's really quite mild. . . . Betsey, dear, I understand."

"You do. You're an angel. . . . You don't think me a monster, do you?" she half sobbed, looking up into his kind eyes, as she sank into a seat.

"No, of course not. I consider you're a woman awfully put upon—regularly bashed by Fate! No one, knowing all the circumstances, and your own peculiar temperament, could blame you for feeling—not quite *en règle*, shall we say? Even the inspector doesn't, and he's not so much prejudiced in your favour as I am, at least I hope not. But we can none of us do anything one way or another. The Law must take its course."

"Yes, if they'd only let it! Oh, my God! what am I saying?"

"Don't mind me!"

He idly threw Billy's ball, which he was holding, to a little distance, so as to get rid of the boy and his inquiring gaze till Betsey should right herself, for her tears fell softly, like summer rain.

She dried her eyes, and spoke passionately.

"Every woman—even a woman of no temperament at all—would feel as I do, if she had the honesty to admit it—or was as blunt and tactless as I am. Don't I know that if they'd had a tithe of what I've had to put up with, they'd be mad, enraged, wild, to find themselves taken out of the sun they had just crawled out into for a moment—and put back again into the dark cage, alone with a maniac! . . . Tied to him with a chain, and when he moves, they've got to move too! Oh, if Wilfrid were only dead, and the earth over him!"

"You do say dreadful things, my Betsey, somehow, but somehow I understand you. It is this way, isn't it? You mean, if that were so, you would feel he was redeemed—purified from his sin by the wholesome earth, with robins bringing dead leaves to cover him, and so on?"

"Oh, don't be poetical, please," she replied brutally. "I'm afraid I wasn't thinking of him, I was thinking of me. Yes," relenting a little, "that is what I do mean. He would be safe underneath, all his wickedness cancelled down there, thrown away like dirt, like old clothes, like last year's lumber. But to have to think of him continually, alive in a sickening prison cell, the disgusting papers telling you day by day how he is in health and spirits, gloating on it in their horrid way, and all the world expecting me to pelt off to go and kiss him through the bars! My God!"

"Hush!" said Ernest Veere. "Billy's coming back."

She rallied to his caution, and when Wilfrid's boy toddled up to her, she bent to him kindly and normally.

"What is it, Billy? What do you want?"

"To give you a kiss," said the child timidly.

"It's his way of showing sympathy," said Mr. Veere hastily. "Do."

She obeyed and hugged the boy very nicely. Contented with his little demonstration, the child sped away again, and Betsey murmured, shamefaced:

"He wanted to console me for crying, and I was crying because they are going to spare his father's life!"

"Yes, but I don't think they will," said Ernest Veere sensibly. "They won't prevail with the man who's boss now. I know him a bit. He's firm. And the public's a mere sentimental idiot, collectively, and its sympathy's quite misplaced, for I hear, on the best authority, that they have all the trouble in the world to prevent him from finishing himself in prison."

"Poor Wilfrid!" she said gently. She dried her eyes and shook her head. On the lips of the revengeful mænad of a moment ago, Veere felt that the expression of sympathy was sincere, the tardy shining forth of the true womanly sense of pity, whose workings in her had been temporarily obscured by selfish considerations. He loved her, but this

exhibition of a raw soul in its mutiny, which he now saw he had laid himself out for, when once he began to court her, troubled and worried the simple, even quality of his nature a little.

Did Betsey Altamont apprehend that her slave, even in so little, was becoming alienated? For she stood up and stooped to him, saying sweetly, with her tremulous bow-shaped mouth:

"Ernest, I've made a fool of myself, and you've let me. Thank you. Come, Billykins, we'll be going. Send us home, will you, Ernest? Don't come with us this time. I want to tell poor Ada."

"Let's have a look what a nice ship you got!" exclaimed poor Ada, opening the door of Worksop House, and dusting off the flour and currants sticking on her hands. "I was just making you a nice cake for tea."

Betsey, thrall as she was just then to deepest tragedy, could not help making a wry face at this announcement.

"Who gave it to you? Mr. Veere? He *is* a nice kind man. And good gracious, Betsey, my dear, whatever makes *you* look so down in the mouth?"

"I hadn't better tell her this very moment," thought the other woman, half considerate, half cowardly, and busied herself in extricating the child from damp garments, complicated by reason of their smallness.

Nervously she said, "Look what Billy's done to his pants, messing about by the Round Pond! I knew you would be cross."

"Not I!" said Ada cheerfully. "I'm not a fusser. No more'd you be, if you'd had two. But you're a regular old maid, you are!"

"Somebody may as well be pleased," said Betsey then, in a hard voice. "Ada, there's a petition set up in all the shops to the Home Secretary to get Wilfrid off!"

Ada dropped Billy's cap that she was holding. Mrs. Altamont picked it out of the grate. "Now, don't faint—don't be silly, or I'll wish I hadn't told you," she murmured hastily.

"You just dare not tell me! Who d'ye say'll get him off? The King?"

"I said the Home Secretary. He can reverse the verdict if he thinks proper."

"Don't bother me with your Home Secretary! Does he think Wilfrid'll get off—I mean, do you? . . . God a mercy! I don't know where I've got my head! You might be kind, Betsey, though you don't care. It's life and death to me!"

She sat down by the fire and rocked herself to and fro, and the firelight caught one of the grey strands in her hair. There were several. Betsey saw them. Ada was only twenty-seven. Betsey knelt down beside her.

"Yes, I will be kind. But I know nothing more than that there's a petition out—which I didn't sign——"

"Oh, Betsey, and you his wife! How could you!"

"I couldn't, Ada. It's no good, I don't want him saved. I'm not a Catholic, but I want him to be well punished for his fault here, and then perhaps God will let him off purgatory—afterwards. He ought to pay, and then they won't send the bill in again."

"He's paid! He's paid—in full. He tried to kill himself, that was paying—his way of paying. And then there's me! Can't you think of me? Why must I pay? *I* never murdered anybody. And if Wilfrid dies it will be my life that they take. Oh, Betsey, you are so much cleverer than me—you've been edicated—give your mind to it! Think and tell me what you think. I can't put two ideas together. I'm too addled with misery. Oh, say you think he may come back?"

Mrs. Altamont spoke her pious lie distinctly. "I think it is possible he may live to come back—to you. In twenty years or so!"

"Oh, thank you. You mean——"

" I mean they won't let him out all at once. They will send him to penal servitude, and, if he is very good, they might commute his sentence—let him out sooner, you know."

" I'll be dead, perhaps, first," said Ada, staring into the fire, and grasping a fold of Betsey's gown. " I may never see my children's father again ; you don't seem to think of that, Betsey ? Oh, cruel, cruel 'tis ! You don't pity him—but you might pity me ? "

" Yes I do, I do," returned the other, in full generous tones, putting her soft white hand over the bony talons that clawed her gown. " And that's why I——! But I don't—now——"

Mrs. Altamont's incoherency mattered little, for Mrs. Cox paid no attention to her strangled meanings. She spoke on, swiftly, interrupting her comfortress :

" Oh, but, Betsey, even if I never see him again I can get on, for I shall know he won't be dead—not hanged . . . by his poor thin neck. . . ." A long shudder ran through her. " Such an awful death, Betsey ! You couldn't wish it for any one—not even a man you hate—as you hate Will. . . ."

Mrs. Altamont made no reply. She had slid down on to her knees on the hearthrug beside her cook—her husband's mistress, of whose hand she did not choose to let go. She alternately chafed and clasped it. Ada evidently derived comfort from her unspoken, only faintly indicated, sympathy, the touch was all. . . . Firmly she held the kind nurselike hand, as a baby might, uncritical of the quality of the emotion that radiated thence. Presently she raised her head and flung back the shroud of her crisp black hair ;—

" That's settled, isn't it ? He'll be let off. . . . The Home Secretary's a kind man. . . . A just man. He can't deny . . . and all England's on Will's side. . . . He can come back to me ! He can come back when he likes, and any hour of the day or night he'll find me waiting ! "

A pause.

Ada was dimly vexed. She could not see Betsey's

face, sedulously concealed, and that disturbed her. She repeated :

" He'll find me waiting ! And, Betsey, you're tied to him too ? . . . fast tied. We're both tied to him, aren't we ? . . . Oh, Betsey, do speak, do say something ! "

" How can I ? " exclaimed the other passionately, between her sharply taken breaths. " Do you want me to say that he'll find me waiting too ? You do ? Two women he's——! My God ! " Her voice changed. " Where's the child ? "

She jumped up, leaving the other prone under her withering displeasure. " Where's Little Katie ? " she continued.

" Having their teas, bless them ! " answered Ada, in smothered tones. Then plucking up a spirit, she declaimed :

" Poor innocent children, that you want to make orphans of ! "

She nursed her knees and rocked to and fro, an interminable gesture. Betsey, tearless, sat up, in a high chair, sardonically regarding her vicar, officiating now in the full panoply and trappings of grief.

XX

Weeks passed. The petition for Altamont's life lay on the counters of shops and gathered up names, the lists in the papers swelled apace. The two women whose whole fate depended on the whim of the Home Secretary, acted on by the will of the sentimental section of the British public, knew no ease. The prayers that went up from Worksop House must have clashed and neutralised each other on their way to the throne of the Most High. Ada formulated her prayers; she was a believer. Betsey did not, but hers were none the less insistent, though they were addressed to no specific arbiter and unregistered on the mental altars we all have within us. They could not "settle to anything." Ada Cox could not cook, but then, this omission was adjusted by the corollary that Mrs. Altamont could not eat. Billy and Little Katie did not starve, their joint guardians took care of that, they were as happy as quiet little children ever are at Christmas.

For Christmas and its enforced merriment came down on the sad, expectant household of four, and sucked them up in its insensate round of meaningless ceremonies. To please the children! The colour of oranges, the sound of crackers, a blue ribbon round Ginger's neck—all these tender minutiæ of seasonable jollity were duly supplied by the two agonised women who were responsible before Heaven for the callow young and what should be the halcyon days of their infancy.

In the tactless papers there was much talk of a Christmas prisoner and seasonable clemency, which did not escape two pairs of eyes in Worksop House, and gave rise to very different feelings. Both Ada and Betsey bought halfpenny papers and conned them in their cold winter bedrooms. Either woman would have died of shame if the other had caught her in this nefarious act. And their confusion proceeded from divers motives. Mrs. Altamont's attitude towards the appeal to mercy was never again alluded to by the other excited participant in the Perton tragedy, who honestly tried to forget that Betsey, whom she loved and who was so kind, eagerly scanned the papers to find a result counter to all her own dearest hopes.

The whole neighbourhood that ostracised, and were in their turn ostracised by, the wife of Altamont watched her behaviour keenly. Her cook, when she went out of doors to do the necessary marketing—for Betsey never went into a shop now, or out at all except with Mr. Veere, was stared at by all Mrs. Altamont's old friends occupied on the same errand. One or two of them went so far as to ask her how her mistress was? The Burne-Jones cook—"a queer-looking woman, you know, but I daresay Betsey finds a difficulty in getting respectable servants to come to her!"—was used to answer shortly, sullenly, and refused to contribute the information, a desire for which had prompted the question. Evangeline Simmons, kind, curious soul, did more than speak to the cook, she thought she would like to send Mrs. Altamont a Christmas card. She carefully chose out one that did *not* in any way bear on the situation, and she left it at the door, which Ada answered, Little Katie clinging to her gown. Evangeline was grateful for even this transitory glimpse into the interior of her dear Betsey, whose sorrows she had made two pound ten out of. She asked to see her as usual, and as usual was told that Mrs. Altamont was not at home.

"How proud she is!" was her respectful thought, as she

turned away. A large London tradesman's cart rattled up just then and left—actually—a small Christmas tree at the door of Worksop House! Mr. Veere was going to give the cook's children a Christmas tree! Her novelist's mind jumped at once to that conclusion, which happened to be the right one.

This romance going on under the shadow of the gallows delighted Evangeline. The motor-clad furry Prince, the cloistered beauty, the Burne-Jones cook, the mysterious starved-looking children that went with the cook, and whom Veere thought it necessary to provide with a seasonable fir-tree from Baltic forests!—Oh, why wouldn't Betsey see her and let her be in it? It was her due. She wasn't narrow, like Mrs. Gedge; she was truly the *confidante* proper, or improper—built for the part! She supposed Betsey was a bit annoyed by that wretched interview! She was, indeed, by now, a little ashamed of having written it, a Judas who felt inclined to quarrel with the scanty wage of silver doled out to her by *The Sweep*, that patron of lost sensational causes.

She took to haunting the outskirts of Worksop House, making it convenient to pass by the door at least three or four times a day. Thus the daily visits of Mr. Veere to the house, and the slightly more spaced out ones of Inspector Whortleberry, did not escape her encouraging notice. But these two were only accessories, she *would* get speech of Betsey, the chief protagonist! Of that she was determined.

Her opportunity came. The next time Inspector Whortleberry came, it was on Twelfth Night. The snow had fallen and Ada, in shrewish tones, was interviewing a snow-away at the door. Whortleberry nodded to Mrs. Altamont's cook, whom even he was far from suspecting to be the Ada Cox mentioned in the Altamont trial, and passed in. Miss Simmons, with the courage of romance, followed him, and by

some dexterous juggling with outer and inner doors that folded back, succeeded in evading his eyes and those of Ada. She stowed herself away in one of the upstairs rooms, where she patiently suffered the worst extremities of cold, while the interview with the inspector lasted.

Inspector Whortleberry had not much to say. In fact his was a Christmas visit. His superior soul revolted against wishing Mrs. Altamont either a merry Christmas or even a Happy New Year, but by sheer good luck he had found a card in one of the vast trays exhibited by the shops which embodied his hopes on her behalf and stated them, so it seemed to him, in the most delicate way. Under the floral emblem that decorated the card, a line from Shakespeare was blazoned :

"... *My gentle lady, I wish you all the joy that you can wish.*"

Mrs. Altamont tore off the envelope and looked at it ruefully. She was embarrassed. But she reflected, with her usual elasticity of thought and sympathy, that the choice of this card showed nothing but nice feeling on Mr. Whortleberry's part, and she therefore thanked him for it cordially and prettily, stuffing into his hands some splendid crackers for the children he had not got, though he was much too shy to tell her so.

His unofficial visit had lasted a shorter time than poor Mrs. Cox expected. She fell away from the door in a strained position as soon as Betsey opened it to let the Inspector out. He cleverly turned aside and looked out of the window while Betsey raised Ada Cox.

"My poor girl," said she kindly, "we were not talking about that!"

After the stress of the moment was over and Whortleberry had gone, she was inclined to be a little more severe. She interviewed her cook in the kitchen, as she was preparing the potatoes for an Irish stew.

"You mustn't, Ada, you really mustn't let yourself down so as to listen at doors. And why you should imagine that Inspector Whortleberry always comes to talk about Wilfrid——"

"What's he come for, then? To blarney you and get your name up! Oh, you needn't toss your head, that's what they're all saying!"

"Who's all saying?"

"They! They!" Ada repeated obstinately. "I tell you you won't have a bit of character left. There's that Miss Simmons always hanging about, trying to get by me—I shouldn't wonder if she isn't in the house now—I thought I saw something go past when that man come!"

"Nonsense, Ada. Keep to the point, and that is, you must really stay in your kitchen when I have visitors."

"And leave you and him shut up for hours together——"

"That's not true, Ada."

"Poor Wilfrid! Nobody cares what becomes of him but me! *You* aren't talking about Wilfrid, you says—no, trust you! Your own two beautiful selves, of course. And yet that's the man that knows all about my poor boy and could tell me if he liked. But you're right, it ain't no good my listening at doors to what you and he say, or I'd do it, and more, if I could get to know about him. I'm fit to burst. I have to go picking it up bit by bit from the tradesmen, and look silly, arsking questions, as if I was keen on knowing about murders and bloody details and that—I who never knew anything about that sort of thing till I came into this family! . . . No, I know well enough as the policeman doesn't come to talk about my affairs—not he! I've listened to you two enough to know that it ain't worth my while to listen. Nor Mr. Veere, neither, comes for that. I call it shameful, you, his wife, his real wife, not to take more care of his name!"

She paused, exhausted with the mere effort of vituperation.

Mrs. Altamont turned away with a disagreeable smile on her lips. Her show of outward tranquillity calmed the other woman, who turned and looked back to the far end of the room where her child was playing in the window-seat.

"Now, then, I suppose I'll have to go," she sighed, spent. "You give me notice, don't you? Here, Billy, put away them bricks of yours, and let's take ourselves off where we come from!"

"Leave the child alone, Ada!" Betsey placed herself in front of the boy, who in full confidence never even suspended his making of bridges. "I'm not going to take a bit of notice of what you say, except to tell you you'll be sorry for it afterwards. You've got a lot to put you out and vex you. So have I, but in a different way. Be quiet now, stop crying, there's a dear! We won't talk of it again. . . . I don't know how you will look at the piece of news Mr. Whortleberry did tell me—not to-day, but a few days ago. I didn't tell you, not to hurt you more, but Wilfrid nearly managed to do for himself last week in prison—got hold of a knife or something. That's all *he* cares for their reprieve! And to tell you the truth I respect him for it! I think better of him than I did, for attempting it. . . . And I think it was a shame of them to prevent him making an end of himself at the first, and getting decently out of it all!"

"Yes, and leave you free to marry your man! . . . Now—you may believe me, I'd sooner go!" She clutched the little boy again, and with hysterical strength lifted him right over her shoulder.

"*Will* you put that child down! He's far too heavy for you now, thank goodness!"

The mother let him slide out of her arms, and Billy sidled up and clung to Mrs. Altamont, whose breast heaved as she took him on her knee. Ada stood glowering on the pair with sullen vindictive eyes. At last Betsey looked up; hers were full of kindness and contrition.

"Poor child, he doesn't know what to make of it, us two quarrelling! You looked as if you were going to claw my eyes out, my dear, don't you know!"

Ada said nothing. She seemed tired; and leaned against the kitchen table, while Mrs. Altamont went on softly:

"Of course, I shan't let this outburst of yours make any difference—not even your last taunt about Mr. Veere. But I'll tell you how it really is. You silly girl, do you suppose that Mr. Veere would think of marrying the widow of a man who has been hanged for murder—the murder of his own uncle too? My poor Ada, don't you see that your precious Wilfrid has spoilt both our lives, yours and mine, whatever happens. Only if he *is* reprieved, mine will be spoilt a little worse—and you'll be no better off. Look at it like that. Try to see my point of view. For I——" she paused. "It may sound brutal, but I had hoped to be able to do something decent with the remains of my life—make a fresh start——"

"If I understand you," said Ada, quite quietly—she had begun to peel potatoes—"you are building your happiness on a man's death! That seems a bit queer to me! . . ." She picked out an eye from the potato vindictively. She heard Betsey catch her breath, almost sob, and when she looked up again her mistress was gone.

The kitchen fire crackled brightly, Billy had returned to his bricks, Ginger lay stretched full length in indolent ease in front of the blaze. The sight focussed Ada's rage. She seized a broom and flourished it in the cat's direction, then desisted weakly and laid it aside. She addressed her little son, who was regarding her, wide-eyed, and took him in her arms.

"We'll let the cat be, won't we, Billy? She's fond of him, as much as she's fond of anybody! Hard as nails she is. . . ."

The cat, scenting disturbance, rose and stretched itself,

with an eye on the door. Ada continued to rock herself and Billy, murmuring :

" Go 'long, Ginger, go 'long to her ! She's in the dining-room warming her toes, and naught but a man's life between her and her happiness. But you and me, sonny—we don't forget ! "

XXI

Mrs. Altamont rushed up to her bedroom to get a pocket-handkerchief. Evangeline Simmons came forward :

" Oh, Betsey, I had to—I had to see you somehow. Won't you forgive me ? "

" Yes, yes. Sit down," said the other wearily. " I'm too tired to have another row ! "

" Who've you had a row with ? "

" My cook," said Betsey laconically. " She gave me notice."

" After all your kindness to her ! "

" What kindness ? I give her wages—the same as Georgie had."

" Yes, but you took her with all those children. And I daresay a husband out of work somewhere ? '

" No, no husband."

" Are the children——— ? "

" Illegitimate—yes."

" How awfully good of you ! Look here, I've brought a book for you—you know you wanted it. The condemned book—Lee-Brice's. I'll give it you. I caught it up just before I left home——"

" And came on here with your burnt-offerings," said Mrs. Altamont. " Thanks, I never read novels now."

" The novel has come to you, hasn't it ? " hazarded Evangeline, slyly laying her present down.

" Come to stay, I think, like motor-cars. Well, as you're here, we had better go and sit where there's a fire."

" Delighted. My crop of chilblains is terrific this winter."

She babbled about her chilblains till they were settled by the dining-room fire downstairs. Ada's children were banished to the kitchen for the first time in their stay, by a visitor.

"You see one reason why I refuse myself to people?" said Betsey. "These poor little things have the freedom of the house, and I don't fancy Mrs. Wormeley caring to come and tumble over my cook's family using the dining-room."

"Oh," said Evangeline, "if that was all! Mrs. Wormeley——!" Betsey was eyeing her curiously. "But why need we talk about Mrs. Wormeley?"

"What do you suppose I let you in for, Evangeline? I want to know all the gossip about me."

"Oh, do you?" Evangeline settled in, threw off her boa, and bared her ankles to the blaze. "What fun! Well, of course, you know—— But do let me say first, that I, personally, utterly approve of you——"

"You would!"

"Yes, you see I am a thorough woman of the world. Nothing shocks me that the smart set does. I adore sharp contrasts and antithesi—is that right?"

"I dare say. I keep off such dangerous ground myself. Go on. What do they say?"

"Well, you know, you are not taking it quite as they think you ought. Mrs. Gedge is a wee bit jealous, as we all know, and the more Dr. Gedge asks her to look you up, the more she won't, and it's worth as much as his life is worth to offer to go and see you himself, or he'd have bounded! Madge Wormeley's really all right, only Mortimer is the usual reactionary husband, don't you know, the kind of Helmer man we all used to talk about! He told Nora—Madge, I mean—that he'd have had no objection to her supporting you, if you had been keeping quiet, but you've chosen your atmosphere wrong, for him, don't you know, being consoled all over the place by the son of the——"

"Nephew."

"—Nephew of the man your husband—attacked. And they say you went to call on the barmaid—he liked, and gave her money."

"Is that all?"

"No. You're supposed—you know what people are!—to have a flirtation with the policeman who brought you the news—that he's in and out the house constantly."

"After my cook, perhaps?"

"That may be. I'll tell Madge Wormeley. But the worst thing you've done is casting *me* off so completely. Me, the only woman in all Wimbledon who could understand you, knew you through and through—a real broad-minded woman who went a little too far, even for them, and you kept *me* away! As if, Madge said, you couldn't stand even a tolerant person seeing what you were up to! Some of those motor rides, for instance——"

"Why didn't I take you, eh?"

"Well, once or twice, say, to give a decent colour to the business. It isn't as if you disliked me!"

She looked keenly at Betsey, wondering if she had really read the article about her—Betsey, who now looked so innocent and unwitting. She concluded that no ordinary woman could be so full of guile as to conceal her knowledge thus perfectly, and she was emboldened to lay her hand on Betsey's arm and beg, appealingly:

"Now, my dear old pal, why wouldn't you make all right and see me sometimes?"

"To tell you the truth, dear old chum, I forgot you! So much going on! I've never had a dull moment since the day Wilfrid was tried."

"Oh, Betsey, I'm so sorry for Mrs. Wormeley, she would so enjoy hearing you say that! You're just the same—epigrammatical, and cool as ever!"

"You can go and tell her you've seen me—retail all my

bon-mots! It's her day at-home. Good Lord, what a way back it seems!"

"Gracious! So it *is* her day. Do you remember those sort of things?"

"Submerged landmarks—yes."

"You *have* got an edge on you, dear. They'd be simply delighted to see you, I believe."

"And hustle me into a cupboard as soon as they heard Mr. W.'s step in the hall. No, thank you. Have they still got Selina?"

"Gracious, no! No more than you've got Georgie."

"I could have kept Georgie if I'd liked," said Mrs. Altamont, with vivacity. "She didn't leave to better herself, like, I'll bet you a shilling, Selina did, but to get married. Crump's man, in Wimbledon—a very decent young fellow."

"Well, never mind. Let's talk about something interesting. That petition they've sent up—do you think it'll have any effect? I ask you because I know you're broad-minded enough to look at the question dispassionately, aren't you?"

"Oh, quite. I'll answer you. Listen. Do you suppose, Evangeline Simmons, that if I had thought Wilfrid would get off, and that it was on the cards I might have to go on living here among you all, that I should have cared to set all the neighbourhood against me? It would have been too silly. But I knew from the very first—I had an instinct or whatever you like—that he'd be hanged. So I wanted to make the place too hot to hold me, and to have every excuse for getting out of it. I'm glad you all took your cues so quick and dropped me. It doesn't make it at all hard to leave, as it might have been, if people had been kind to me and stood by me. You left it to an outsider to do that, a man who had the grace to come to Miss Altamont's funeral because he respected her. Think of that!"

Her voice broke.

"And as for me, why, you have all been horrid to me.

Perfectly detestable! You too, Evangeline! Don't suppose I don't know quite well what you've done in particular—the shabby trick you played on me! That article! You can't think, can you, why I didn't speak of it before? The fact is I didn't care to. I'm going away to shake the mean tale-bearing dust of you all off my feet, and break new ground, good, clean, fresh ground instead of the weary old dust of a squalid suburb. You can call me cynical if you like——!"

"I do," murmured Miss Simmons hastily.

"Yes. You used to admire it in me! Well, take this from me now, and for ever after hold your peace. I am *not* going to marry Mr. Veere. I won't hide anything from you. I'm not going to bind myself to any one—on this side of the Atlantic, at least."

Evangeline looked stunned with this impact of intelligence.

"This *is* news!" she mumbled.

"Well, you've got what you came for, haven't you?"

"I think, Betsey, all the same, if you'll allow me to say so, that you might show a little human feeling for the poor man whose wife you still are. A husband is a husband——"

"Not when he's doing time!" said Betsey, jumping up. "You see, I'm bent on disgusting you. I have. I'm glad. It serves you right. Now go and tell them all. Here comes Mr. Veere. I must send you away."

"Oh, Betsey, mayn't I stop and see him? I met him once."

"On my doorstep. I heard about it. No, I am afraid I must really ask you to go. Mr. Veere has a horror of meeting local people. I've promised never to let him run the risk of that, so you see there's nothing for it but to reluctantly turn you away!"

XXII

Veere passed Miss Simmons as she went out, and took not the slightest notice of her beyond giving her immensely too much room to pass him. His mien was so portentous, that Ada Cox, in whom all the cords that tent-pegged her down to conventionality seemed to have snapped, walked into the room with him when she introduced him, and witnessed his greeting of her mistress.

Furthermore, he did not offer to shake hands with Betsey. She rose, startled, and Ada from behind exclaimed :

" There's something ! You've got news ! "

Veere did not seem to be aware that it was not Betsey who spoke. His teeth were set. He flung off his motor coat, revealing the alert stripling imprisoned in the hoggish shape of custom. . . .

" Hasn't your faithful Whortleberry told you ? The Home Secretary's commuted the sentence ! "

It was Ada, her eyes bleared with the tears that were coming, who shouted, " What's that mean ? "

He answered her. " Penal servitude—and an innocent woman tied to him for life ! "

Ada fell prone on the floor. Betsey, who had been standing with her hands down, knuckles firmly planted on the table, came round and helped Veere to pick the woman up.

" Oh, Wilfrid—Wilfrid—not to be hanged—not to be killed ! " she moaned, as she fell into complete unconsciousness.

" Brutes we are ! " Veere murmured under his breath, as

according to Betsey's concise directions, he carried her upstairs. The tragic unseeing eyes of the mistress seemed to glare down at the wife of Altamont as her head dangled over the banisters.

"Oh, take care, take care!" Betsey murmured, shame-stricken, but indeed he was doing as well as he could.

"Keep Billy quiet!" she said to Ernest Veere, when he left the upper room, having first laid the fainting woman carefully on her bed.

The frightened child had followed them up. The door of the room where his mother lay was sharply closed. He looked round aghast, prepared to cry, but Mr. Veere, sitting down on the stairs, took the boy on his knee.

"Billy! Billy!" he murmured.

He could think of nothing else to say. But Billy, fortunately, liked him, trusted him, and ramming his head between Mr. Veere's chin and breast lay so, quietly.

Veere reproached himself for his crudeness, shading into selfishness. He should have been less sudden in his revelation. He had been absorbed in the effect of this piece of intelligence on his and Betsey's fortunes; wondering so deeply how she would take it, and if she would still adhere to her plans of the other day; he had forgotten to be gentle with the other poor creature, whose heart was concerned in the mere physical salvation of Wilfrid Altamont, and to whom his news was so outrageously joyful that it should have been softened to her nerves, seared with long waiting and suspense. It was easy for Betsey to be calm. For her it represented part of a mere business calculation—the reprieve was inopportune, untoward, but not of vital significance, since she cared for neither Wilfrid nor himself. He thought her cruel to the one, selfish and indifferent to the other, since this result was directly counter to his wishes. . . . She was very hard, as they said. . . .

The door of the bedroom opened and Betsey came out. Her eyes were blazing, her hair looked alive. At once all his

love and passion returned at the sight of her. She beckoned to Billy.

"Go to your mother, Billy."

The child unwound his arms from Veere's neck and sidled into the room Betsey had vacated. She evidently took him up to the bedside, placed him on it, and then closed the door on him.

"She's better now," Betsey said, in a strange voice that he had never heard her use before. There was caution, too, in her walk as she approached him and leaned on the banister at the stair-head. He was going to get up, but she signed to him to remain where he was.

"That poor girl!" she said. "Do you realise that she fainted for joy? Joy? She adores my brute of a husband."

Her eyes narrowed. She looked down inquiringly at him.

"I suppose you're quite sure the news is true? Because if it isn't——"

"True as death, and far more horrible. Oh, Betsey, what will you do now? Tell me. Let me help. I'll do anything you like."

"Look here!" she said roughly, permitting, at least not denying, his clasp of her knees as she stood over him. She made a violent dab at her chin with a handkerchief, then spoke with a rush:

"Do you still want me?"

"Of course I do."

"Then I'll come to you."

"D'ye love me, Betsey?" was his stiff, unaccountable answer. A deep wave of distrust washed over his passion as she stood there, blushing, for the first time in his knowledge of her. He was actuated by a desire to probe her motives judicially, to sift them to the bottom once for all, now, while her soul stood naked before him and her cheeks were crimsoned for shame of self-revelation. Then let the glamour steal over

the beloved again, and he would give way to it completely. He was aware that he would fall, but he must know first.

Betsey replied slowly and squarely, as he would have her.

"No. I feel to you as I always told you I did." She paused, laughed, and went on quickly. "Half and half. Nothing to speak of. As Miss Altamont felt to your uncle, perhaps? But I ask you definitely if you want me? And it is because I have made up my mind. Fate's against me, it seems, but I'll fight Fate. I will *not* be tied for life to a convict with twenty years or more to serve—and a woman here fainting for joy at the news that kills me. She's his real wife, as she'd have been his real widow. You can take me if you want me. Everything's gone wrong. I'm done with it all!"

"Then, with your gracious permission—" he said, rising and taking her in his arms. The great dull clock at the stair-head ticked out the parcels of her surrender. . . .

She lay there, yielding, passive, but conscious of no such passionate fusing of identities as may take a pair of lovers in such case, but rather the reverse. She was pained by the polite irony piercing through Ernest Veere's phrases. She was soothed, as the slow seconds counted themselves out, by her intimate awareness of its overcoming by the glamour that should be shed with the first embrace. It was overcome, but she did not know that the man, permitting his inclination for the woman to have sway, kept his head, and made a solemn reservation on her behalf. . . .

"You trust me, at least?" he asked, setting her on her feet again.

"Yes," she sighed. His kiss had moved her.

"It's a funny world, isn't it, my sweetheart? Well, come downstairs now, and help me on with my coat. I'll be with you again this evening to arrange things."

She demurred.

"Oh, yes, they must be arranged. No tricks shall be

played on you. I know you like people to be businesslike. We shall see if your poor life is to be as maimed as you thought it would be. It all depends. Your ideal may be attained after all, some of it."

"What do you mean?" She laughed, but the light had all gone out of her face, which was a little puffy and heavy, and her lips clumsier in curve. "She'll look like that when she's fifty," thought Ernest Veere involuntarily. "Coarsish, like the old apple-woman who had a stall near my school."

She helped him on with his coat. She murmured. "What do you mean by talking of my ideal? I've smashed it up. I've promised to go to the dogs with you."

"That's what it's called, my dear." He shrugged into the sleeves.

"And that's what it is. Don't suppose I'm under any delusions as to what I've done. I've done it with my eyes open. The moment Ada fainted, I made up my mind to make you that proposal—you made it first, remember—and I have! . . ."

"Yes, you've done it and no mistake!" he answered, softly pinching her ear. Both speech and gesture had no relevance to his thought, and she felt it to be so. His frivolous attitude could not conceal a definite hardness that was growing up in him concerning her, he was what a business customer might have called "nasty." He continued:

"You leave it to me and don't be so cocksure about your own destruction. You've led the ass to the water, but are you so sure you can make him drink? Ass, I say. I am an ass, oh, I am! And obstinate at that! . . . Good-bye—for the present!"

He was going; she looked so like a chidden child that he returned to kiss her.

"By Jove, you are a pretty woman, and I love you all the same! You'll always get me, this way. . . . Will you give me some dinner when I come back?"

" Are you coming back ? "

" Yes, of course, why not ? I said I was. That woman "—he indicated the room above, where Ada lay—" won't be about again to-night, will she ? "

" No. I'll give her some soup and tuck her up early." Her eyes sought his.

" Had you rather I didn't come back ? "

" I have no feeling either way," she replied sturdily.

XXIII

It was early spring. Mr. Veere never missed April in England. He brought Betsey back from the Continent, where they had been travelling about for three months, and established her on his yacht, cruising in English waters.

Mrs. Altamont liked England better than Paris or even Sicily. She was glad to have seen these places, though. She never wanted to go abroad again, and she was thinking so, as she stood and sat and lounged on Cowes Pier. She had got them to row her in from the yacht to meet Ernest Veere, who had run up to London about some business, chiefly connected with her affairs, she believed, and who was returning by the Cowes boat, due even now.

He would have made it his business to see Mrs. Cox, left sole chatelaine of Worksop House and with Betsey's income to draw upon for herself and the children. It had been formally made over to her. The lease of Worksop House ran for a few years more, but Mr. Veere was going to dispose of the remainder, and Ada was to retain the sum accruing from that negotiation as well. By and by, Mrs. Altamont had arranged to go back to Ada for a short while to help her to "get out." Then the connection between the two women would cease.

Ada had been offered, and had accepted, the post of housekeeper, cicerone, and caretaker at Angernoune Castle, which Sir Joris Veere had bought eight years ago, as an experiment, in a highly dilapidated condition, from Lady Dobrée's father, the Earl of Angernoune. Much money had been spent on it.

The Keep, *tempo* William II, was bolstered up and rendered habitable. But it had been found on examination that that ancient fabric would not stand the introduction of electric lighting and dinner-lifts and other modern appliances, so a modern house, at fabulous cost, had been built in the court-yard, whence the flag flew when the family were in residence, and not enjoying the balmier airs of Mill Strand, Sir Joris's place in Sussex. The purchase of decrepit Angernoune was a millionaire's freak, an extravagance, a decided convenience to the vendors; yet the haughty impoverished nobleman who took his title from thence could never bear to accept Sir Joris Veere's repeated handsome offers of hospitality. He had, however, no objection to allowing his daughter to marry his nephew and heir.

Ada, with her one surviving child—Little Katie had never "growed," but had died quietly while Veere and Betsey were abroad—meant to wait there for Wilfrid. Wilfrid was coming back to her some time—must come back. The cold North had no terrors for the city girl, fixed, rapt in her mulish central idea. Niched up there, in her mediæval setting, she would gain health and look more picturesque than ever, while her boy would grow strong and hardy and defeat, as far as possible, inherited or vicious town instincts.

Mrs. Altamont's plans were of necessity vague. Not from a business point of view, indeed. She knew she was amply and solidly provided for. She and he had not minced the matter of the pecuniary basis of their alliance. Stock had been made over to her and invested in her name, she had an income for life—if she should leave Veere's protection to-morrow.

That night at Worksop House, when Veere came back and dined with her and they had settled things, she had been as hard as nails, almost rapacious in her determination to have the thing in black and white, something solid to depend on in this crumbling of her moral standards. Veere had almost hated her for a moment. The ugly joints of her character

came uppermost, jogged forward into prominence with the violent rift in her self-respect. She meant, and showed that she meant, to sell herself dear.

And he had not exacted the *quid pro quo !*

. . . . .

Even in Paris she had only half realised it. She was tired, he was forbearing, he was a dear.

They had been to see everything. They did monuments and plays together. He had bought her clothes and jewels. She had accepted them as one accepts gifts which one expects to have to repay in kind.

At the end of a week she asked him seriously to buy her no more presents, her income, of which she had already received an instalment, would, she averred coldly, suffice to dress her and pay for her cabs unless he was with her. Her tone was sour and strictly businesslike.

He was not always with her. He treated her like a woman of the world, not as a pretty doll that he brought away to seduce. She was allowed to preserve her somewhat gloomy independence. He had friends in Paris, he preferred not to introduce her to them at all, to labelling her as his permanent companion. She did some of the monuments and some of the plays alone. He was never out of temper. They often talked of Dobrée.

In Italy she was happier. They led a life of errantry, riding about, bathing, mountaineering. Betsey was a frank tomboy ; that side of her nature had been in abeyance, too. Her hair, warmed through and through by Italian sun, was more golden than ever. And the nice thing about Italy was that it was all new to Ernest too. They had adventures in Sicily, and after in Bosnia. Then when they reached England and got aboard the yacht, an exciting episode, which nearly resulted in the loss of the vessel off the tame little Needles, supervened. They had nearly died together, and

yet, take it all in all, they were less intimate than they had been in those far back days when they had strolled about the streets of London together and scanned the posters for news of Betsey's deliverance.

That wretched, hasty moment on the stair-head at Worksop House had been a turning-point—which had decided nothing. Betsey's move towards the social abyss had been checkmated by her guardian knight. She was grateful to him in theory, irritated in fact by her insistent surmise as to whether it had cost him anything to keep her virtuous? Betsey was vain.

She was waiting for him now, with several little rods in pickle for him, and only a lukewarm welcome. She had found a seat on the landing-stage and sat there watching the boat plough its way to her. It held the man whose society solaced and delighted her, but whose attitude was a perpetual blister to her self-love.

The steward of the *Elisabetta* (renamed in compliment to her) approached and touched his cap.

"I came to tell you, madam, that there's nothing to prevent our getting off as soon as the skipper comes. The washing is in."

The Cowes boat made the pier. . . . Mr. Veere was coming off, hurrying along the raying boards, slender, businesslike, alert—he was two years younger than she.

"Here you are, Betsey! I've settled everything. St. Malo—now! We can get off this afternoon—has the washing come?"

"Yes, Masters just told me so."

"That's good. Come down to Bingley's. I must get a few things. I've just remembered that I haven't any films."

"Yes!" said Betsey agreeably. They turned and went off together, chatting amicably, like a husband and wife.

They were returning to the yacht for luncheon, their arms laden with odds and ends of marine stores, cigarettes, and films, when Betsey touched his arm:

"A lady, bowing and beckoning to you!"

"Oh, I say! Good luck! It's Dobrée and her Miss Taylor."

His face radiant with good fellowship, he went forward to meet them, and Betsey fell back and studied a stationer's window.

Blind rage leaped up in her heart. She condemned it, yet it sprang up anew. She heard all they said.

"Oh, I say, Ernest, angel, lend me threepence! We are lunching at East Cowes Castle, and I've not got enough to pay for the tram boat across Medina."

"Here, take sixpence," said Veere. "It's awkward borrowing coppers of your hostess, however rich, to come back with, isn't it? Where are you two staying?"

"On the *Godiva*, my godfather's yacht, you know. I say, where's that pretty woman got to that was with you? She's hidden herself somewhere! Oh, I suppose I oughtn't to ask?"

"Oh, yes, you may *ask*."

"And you'll tell me she's a Mrs. Jones, wife of an old college friend! It isn't the person you've renamed your yacht after?"

"Oh, you twigged that, did you? Well, now be off to your lunch, and keep yourself respectable. Who is it has got East Cowes Castle this season?"

"Very rich Australians. Good-bye. We *may* come to tea with you—and the wife of Altamont."

"Shall have sailed!" Veere called after her, as he rejoined Betsey, who came out from behind the sheltering eaves of Bingley's, like a chidden child.

When they were in the dinghy, being rowed out to the *Elisabetta*, she said softly, playing with the fringed end of the tiller rope, "I wish you'd marry her soon."

"Who?"

"Lady Dobrée."

"Never was further from it in my life! Why do you say that sort of thing? You are always saying that sort of thing now."

"Am I a cross-patch?"

"Rather."

"I was nicer—in the Worksop House days, eh?"

"You were gayer."

"I was! I was! Isn't it funny! I suppose, if I'd been like this, an ill-tempered virago—as I am now—you'd never have wanted to take Andromeda away from her rock."

"I don't say that!"

His reply struck him as too grudging, he was casting about in his mind to say something kinder, but the end of the short trip had come, and he helped Betsey out and up. He gave her hand a little squeeze, and said, "Come and smoke a cigarette."

"No, I think I'll go to my cabin now, and have a real good cry, till after we've started!"

He laughed. "Nerves! You! Did the meeting with our young friend upset you?"

"Yes, rather. I believe I wanted you to grasp your nettle and introduce me. After all, I'm quite respectable, bating the little fact that I'm the wife of a convict."

"Oh, she'd rather like that. But the other thing—I couldn't have persuaded her of your respectability, at any rate."

"Doesn't she know you're a crank?"

"Not to that extent!"

"Nor did I," Betsey just breathed, as she ran down the companion, and bade the steward, whom she met below, to bring her a glass of wine and some biscuits to her cabin for lunch.

Ernest Veere heard her close the skylight of her state-room, she did not mean him to hear her weep, then Her expressed determination to do so did not disturb him much; he thought

it rather nice of her to announce a cataclysm of nerves and set a limit to it. She was given to having nerves now, it was a new phase. What she said was true enough. She was not nearly so good-tempered as she used to be. She had a tongue and she used it on him sometimes—her benefactor!

He was her benefactor—not her lover. A busy, bustling, hustling man, he was not sufficiently versed in the ways of women to realise that his reasonable platonic attitude was the goad that drove Betsey's tongue, and made her smite him whom she should have spared.

He did not understand her. His easy sympathy was not deep. He thought he made her happy; he himself was contented, which was all he ever expected to be. He was both a materialist and a crank. It is your idealists who cannot be happy with a woman without seducing her. He was not a nervous or excitable man, his emotions waited on his fancies, and a slight, real or supposed, scored deep. Betsey had "huffed" him and disconcerted him in that hour, three months ago, on the stairs at Worksop House when, fiercely railing at Fate, she had flung herself at him and said, "Take me, yet believe me, I have no pleasure in the giving."

His positive, domineering nature bore her some malice. She had made a moral convenience of him.

XXIV

They went down to dinner in the little state-room. Her eyes were as bright as if she had not carried out her threat, while the mind behind them was full of cross motives that chased each other hither and thither, and peeped in and out of its recesses like black and white cats in a suburban garden.

She sat down with a little air of furtive wildness that was charming. There was a streak of blue ribbon in her hair and she had never looked so well.

The pocket of Veere's smoking-jacket bulged with papers.

"We'll go over these after dinner," he said, as soon as Masters had left the room. "But it's all done, and all done right. You're a woman of means, like Miss Altamont of famous memory!"

These were the little things he said that jarred, and at once evoked the protecting motherly instinct in Betsey Altamont. She did not know that Lady Dobrée had once remarked that if Veere hadn't been so clever, he'd have been a bounder, but with far less knowledge of the world than that possessed by the green girl of rank, Betsey realised that sentiment, which Veere disdained, is tact's best ally, and that the strenuous life of business is too apt to brush aside the thin cobwebs of tradition that would cloak and veil for us half life's inevitable grossnesses. She answered tactfully, complying with him.

"How much have I now?"

"Fifteen hundred a year secured to you—safe from all interference from me even if we quarrel."

"How perfectly hateful it sounds!" She tried to thank him but could not, her lips framed the pettish exclamation instead: "Anyhow, Miss Altamont would have approved. Fifteen hundred a year, which I shall retire on when you have married Lady Dobrée—though, after all, I've nothing to retire from! I'm not earning my salary."

"Don't talk like that!"

She could shock him easily. He could not shock her.

Masters came back into the room, and she asked Veere a colourable, indifferent question: "When is Ada going to Angernoune?"

"August."

"Shall I go there and stay with her?"

"Yes, do," said he calmly, though it was the first time the idea had been mooted by the wayward woman. "It would be all right. I rather wanted you to. Let me tell you about it. There are practically two complete houses standing in the courtyard. That is big enough to enclose a whole township, and did, in the Middle Ages. The old Keep is where Mrs. Cox will live, and keep it clean—with help, of course—and show it on Thursdays. That was the arrangement in my uncle's time. Then there's the completely modern building he built opposite—an act of vandalism, and Veere's Folly they called it. I never can see the harm, personally, but then I've got no taste."

"I think it's a cursed thing to remove landmarks."

"Why? if they're so crocky they can't stand up, let alone habitable? The old people were just like me, if you will only think of it! They never scrupled to pull about or pull down the old and insanitary or even the too small to hold them. They'd have laughed in your face if you'd talked to them about the Preservation of Ancient Buildings Society—thought it all your eye and your d—d cheek! They considered that they had architectural ideas of their own quite as good as the ideas of the previous man."

"Oh, once you go back to mediæval times, they *were* as good. The ages of Faith, you know. Men without a religion can't have an architecture."

"Tosh, dear! It's got nothing to do with it. You've been reading Ruskin."

"Among others. But I do think the spirit of the age—and you've got it finely exemplified, Ernest—is antagonistic to beauty. You lie awake thinking of inventions for stupid, selfish, besotted comfort—hideous mouldings by the piece—creaky doors to not fit anywhere. All your minds are given up to labour-saving appliances——"

"The old people hadn't got to think of saving labour, when they'd plenty of cheap labour-slaves. Thomas of Lancaster put thousands of men on to Kymarays Castle, near here. You shall go and see it. Wish we had 'em now, instead of these Trades Union-ridden, uppish, brawling masses we have to work with!"

"Don't, Ernest. I happen to know you are awfully good to your men."

"Have to be! Well, to resume. There we have these two complete dwelling-houses connected by an underground passage. When Uncle Joris had one of his big, dull house-parties, I used to have a bed in the Keep—in the haunted room for preference. I think I'll go there next time. Dobrée and her little lot won't care to dig me out there, and stick my sheets together with acid-drops, even in the daytime. She's got no moral pluck at all. She's afraid of ghosts."

"When is she coming?"

"Well, you see—did I tell you?—" He went on, without waiting for the reply which, indeed, Betsey was not minded to give, for it was in the affirmative and would have muzzled the further explanation she longed for. "I asked her long ago to play hostess for me in the home of her ancestors for the month of August. Do you mind?"

"No, of course not! She was invited before me," replied

Betsey sedately. "And I don't see very well how we could clash—I in the old house, and she in the new. . . ."

She looked across the table at him, using all the power of appeal of which her eyes were capable. "I would so like to beg a promise of you. May I? Say at once if you think you can't do it."

"You sweet baby! What?"

"Promise you won't propose to her while I am there—if I do settle to come."

"I'll promise that, easily—if you on your side will faithfully promise to come," said he. "And—do you think I shall ever propose to her at all? I'm very half-hearted. A month's reign at Angernoune along of me might choke her off from caring to reign there altogether. You know I don't love her. She knows it—or she will. And when the sacrifice is consummated I see myself flying out of our big house in Belgravia or Bloomsbury to have tea with you in your little nest in Brompton—or perhaps you'll choose Kensington?"

She gave a little moan—of disgust, discomfiture, alienation. He was really rather trying.

"Ernest," she spoke severely. "I'll ask you one question, without prejudice, mind! Why, if you don't care for Lady Dobrée more than that, do you *dare* to contemplate marrying her?"

"Shall I tell you?" he said, "and then you'll see that you've known the answer to your own question all along. I am ambitious. For ambition I would sacrifice anything, even love. I'd certainly sacrifice Love. One passion's as good as another. There are only three that really move the world. Ambition, Revenge, and Love. I choose Ambition for my ruling one."

"You make a mistake."

"You say that because you are a woman. Women haven't got beyond Love yet. I can see what Dobrée is— can see that, try as I might, I *couldn't* make her unhappy. So why shouldn't

I marry her and improve my own position, which I care about as an actor cares about his art or a politician his party? By the way, I should stand for Angershire. Dobrée will get that for me, and I shall get her the money she wants. She only cares for money—quite nicely, you know, but it's in the Angernoune blood. They are Norman peasants *au fond* and money's their god. Dobrée, personally, is not exigeante. Give her a child and a couple of motor-cars and she'll be as happy as the day is long."

"No. *Au fond* she is like other women, once you're married to her, she won't stay a schoolgirl! The baby—or the car—will bring her on. Then—where Love isn't, Jealousy rushes in, and instead of helping you in your schemes she may hinder you. Now I've done. You said it might be without prejudice."

She had saddened him. He fiddled with the spoons on the table. Masters came and deposited a coffee-maker in full blast.

"Of course, without prejudice," he said quietly. "Maybe you're right? One has to take risks, and marriage is the biggest gamble of all. I'm getting commonplace, am I not? Anyhow, I'm with *you* now—you, my chosen companion—the woman who's never bored me once since I've known her."

"A 'dead cert' of amusement," she said bitterly. "Well, I must play up, I suppose, or else you'll complain of me. You did to-day, I remember."

"No, Betsey, I should love you if you cut your hair off and preached all the time, so be as cross as you like."

"Love me—do you say?" she asked, with wistful contempt.

"Well, inferior being that I am—disgracefully, crassly material, you do stand for Love with me!"

"The passion you rank after Ambition and Revenge!"

"No, not quite that!" he whispered. "Let me kiss you, and see?"

"No, I won't let you play with fire," she said, with a forced laugh.

"Fire?"

"I am fire, for the present."

"Are you? Yes, you are. Only—such a pal as well!" He looked at her fondly.

She fidgeted on her seat. Her eyes filled with tears. "I'm here, alone with you. . . . I daresay you find it rather trying, but Lady Dobrée's interests must be safeguarded." She busied herself with the coffee.

He was silent. She could not know that he was thinking of Dobrée as he had seen her the last time but one in the Duke of Lax's box at the opera. She was wearing her usual conventionally cut dress that formally exhibited a brief section of her chest—somehow one could not think of it as her breast! He had never seen Betsey except in a high black gown such as she wore now.

"Why do you never wear a low-necked dress?" he asked her, suddenly.

"Because I've never in my life had occasion to get one," said she, in as bitter a tone as she had ever used. The answer revealed at once the deepest depths of the suburban agony she had suffered. "Do you know, I have never been asked out to dinner in my life, and I wasn't going to bother to dress for a few scrubby makeshift concerts."

"The pathos of that remark!" He laughed. "It is the Book of Job in a sentence. Now I see why you were so keen to come out and live——"

"With you?"

"I suppose," he said hastily, "no one has ever told you that you are ten times more charming *en Cinderella?* I am sure of it, though I've never seen you *décolletée*. Yet I like that plain dress of soft black you wear. It is more like a nun's, except that you've no wimple and that your neck rises firm and straight from it like a round white pillar—of alabaster, shall I say?"

"I hate frills and horse collars," said she, blushing at his

praise. "And I suppose my neck is self-supporting because I don't put it in stays. Never did. The kettle boils!" She began to pour out the coffee. "See how my hand shakes! I'm nervous because I cried this afternoon, so I believe you are right. These prolonged *tête-à-tête* between a man and a woman generally lead to neurasthenia. I've got it in my arm, all down. That's why I suppose marriage is always found to be the best arrangement for spacing out lovers' raptures. Sugar?"

XXV

Angernoune Keep, like a grey-haired respectable man of science, hemmed in by a gathering of smart people, stood isolated, bewildered, and mediæval in the vast courtyard, opposite the sophisticated Gothic of the new Dwelling House. Grass no longer grew from the roof of the tower, that had never boasted battlements. Battlements had been ruthlessly supplied by the innovator, the grass had been tidied away ; but the white cockleshells of pilgrims still dotted the lower courses of the north wall, and Ada's boy, standing on the pediment, used to try in vain to pull them out of the mortar, so firmly welded together by the traditions of Roman science.

Modern and old seemed to stand and hate each other ; the young sneered, the old frowned. The boy linked them, playing quietly round the low Norman doorway that gave entrance into the Keep, but longing, childlike, to pull the shiny electric bell fixed in the oak portal of the Dwelling House. Billy was growing strong and healthy, he had no dislike of the fierce sea blast that drove perpetually round the corner of the lone Keep, and tossed his hair, and kept him in continual disarray. It lifted, too, the white locks of Boris, the great Newfoundland, who couched and curvetted all day on the scrubby stretch of lawn whence sprang the carefully husbanded ivy that was supposed to soften the angles of the Dwelling House. Nothing clothed the squareness of the Keep, the north wind took care of that.

It was difficult to be complicated in a place like this. Mrs. Altamont, consciously maimed by suburbanity and short

views, found that her cribbed and cabined thoughts unrolled like banners in this noble wind; in the clear light the deeps were revealed, and the deeps were pure and translucent, after all.

She was glad she had come. She thought that, if the betterment of the fortunes of the man she loved should demand and obtain a mercenary marriage, she would choose to remain here for the winter with Ada. She, then, would be nothing better than a wounded animal, and the Keep at Angernoune would be the lair into which she would creep, to sit there and nurse her sorrow.

The guardroom of Angernoune comprised nearly the whole ground floor, and was dark and soothing. The windows, mere slits for archers to shoot from, could hardly illumine the low-pitched, arched roof, whence all remnants of the authentic plaster of the time had been scraped off by the hand of the restorer, leaving the deeply-pitted surface that had held it so well. The floor's covering of stout hempen matting muffled the feet of outsiders coming in. Betsey chose to spend her days in this part, leaving the kitchen, and housekeeper's room that had been carved out of it, to Ada and her child. During her visit, she agreed to relieve the less well-informed woman of her paid job of showing the Keep on Thursdays, a task which she naturally detested. But Betsey did it *con amore*. She got up her facts carefully, from some old county histories which she found upstairs. Ada had not been expected to do more than render herself mistress of the sixpenny guide that lay by the visitors' book. Local antiquaries, visiting the Castle with their friends, set down the pretty woman's attention to their words as a mark of intelligence, and posted her in many a recondite fact which she was able to retail again. She became an accredited cicerone in Angershire, where the Castle of Angernoune was the staple of antiquarian discussion and interest.

Ada must, of course, resume her duties as soon as Mr. Veere should join Lady Dobrée's party. That came, numerous,

eager and bustling on the first of September, in motors and busloads, with lorries for its belongings, and thin maids and stout maids, and one hairdresser—Lady Blessington's.

Betsey in the indulgence of her boundless curiosity, divested nowadays of morbidity, disinfected as it were by the holy airs of Angershire, showed them all over the antique structure they pretended so cleverly to be interested in. They did not notice the exceptionalness of the cicerone, perhaps her beauty was not quite so glaring; she had grown thinner, paler, sharper featured, and attracted less superficial observation than she would have done a year ago. Before opening the door she always peered through a side-loop window, mounting up into the embrasure, the better to ascertain that Veere did not form one of the party seeking admittance. He was pledged to write and tell her when he was on his way. He was detained for the present in town by some rather tiresome business relative to his succession to his uncle's fortune. But she knew him, he was the sort of person who might motor down without the slightest warning, on a sudden impulse. That is, if the impulse to see her again should become too strong.

She had his heart—such as it was.

Lady Maude Erskine-Robertson visited the Keep, escorted by the novelist, Lee-Brice. They looked all over together, but Lady Maude soon tired of Lee-Brice's real and insulting interest in antiquities and cried off.

"I promised Vallance to have a game of tennis with him," she declared as soon as they got on to the roof. "He is down there on the common, waiting for me! I can see his moustache droop."

"Yes, they said there was a view from here!" answered Lee-Brice, without sarcasm. "Let us go down."

Betsey piloted them past the haunted room, which she never showed to visitors if she could help. It was Veere's room, and she slept in it. They got to the bottom of the stairs, she had felt the novelist's eyes in her back as they went

down, and was not surprised when he whispered to her at the door, " I'm coming back."

She wondered if she would be called upon to reel off any more facts about Angernoune, or if he was like his books. If he was like his books, he would make love to her. So she superficially argued. But she knew she could take care of herself, even with the author of *The Red Corpuscles*.

He wanted no more facts, and yet he was not in the least like his books. He sincerely wanted to gloat over the old well in the guardroom, to expatiate on the stone-flagged narrow passages, to get the atmosphere of mediævalism. He knew more about Angernoune than she could tell him, and though he had probably got it all up from the county history in the smoking-room of the Dwelling House, he managed, with literary sleight of hand, to reissue it with the imprint of his own personality. He did not flirt with Mrs. Altamont, not so much as by the turn of an eyelid, but she was sure that he had come back to study her.

She was left full of a sense of the force and power of this author with an ugly record. His reticence, his pointed imperial, and his record of expurgation, which he seemed to take pride in falsifying, were what impressed her. There was nothing squalid, nothing morbid about him. Were his passions low, and his haunts vile? His pose was perfect. Did he really do harm by his books? His visit had done her good.

Lady Dobrée had a maid—of sorts—she was not what either Betsey or Ada considered a proper maid. " More like a dresser at a theatre," Ada said, and Ada knew. For Betsey, she had her uses. She manœuvred it. Miss Parker and Mrs. Cox, they knew not why or how, struck up a friendship, and sometimes, after dinner and when the wind was not too cold, the former would potter across and ring the bell of the doorway in the Keep, for the key of the underground door of communication between the two buildings had been lost. Betsey knew who had it in his safe keeping. Ada, her Billy safe tucked up in

bed, would be sitting, mending; Betsey dreaming, playing endless patiences, to soothe her mind before she slept. . . . The woman's talk was all, as Betsey had supposed it would be, about her mistress, and incidentally, about Mr. Veere. The second time she came in she began, as usual, with a long competent sigh of satisfaction, to rehearse her own maid-like perfections.

"I don't know, I'm sure, whatever my lady would do without me!"

"She always looks very nice," said Mrs. Cox, politely.

"I'm proud to say she does, but she wouldn't last a day if it wasn't for me washing and mending her. Not that she's not neat, she's got it in her, she's not like Lady Maude, over fond of shoving things on—but would you believe it, Mrs. Cox, that poor girl, for all she's a title, hasn't got more than a couple o' pair of silk stockings to her name? And the ladders that come in them along of the suspenders, you know, it takes me half my time mending them! And washing her veils—chiffon will wash, but it rightly ought to be cleaned. But, gracious, we can't run to so many cleaner's bills! And her gloves—by rights a lady oughtn't to wear darned gloves—but I'll defy you to see my darns! I join the long ones at the wrist same as the girl at the shop showed me——"

"It's very good of you, isn't it?" said Betsey.

"Well, I put my back into it, so to speak, when they engaged me. 'Twas my first place. I wasn't so particular then, and I took a fancy to her. It was what Mr. Brooks calls a sporting chance. I said, I'll see if I can't get her married all off my own bat, and a nice husband to pay for her clothes. Maids bring these things off more than you know. With a little help from other ladies, that take an interest, for reasons! I'll tell you a secret. Lady Maude's got a bet on it. Last season we had several of Lady Maude's own dresses. Her maid didn't like it at all, I can tell you, seeing those good clothes go past her! She's a fool that Chaytor! I shouldn't

allow it if I were her. I mean to have my lady's wardrobe when she's married. It'll be worth while, as it happens. She's done herself well, and I'm never going to leave her—not an earl's daughter like her, who's under obligations to me. For Mr. Veere's the kind of man who wouldn't have me chucked—afterwards."

"Mr. Veere?" said Betsey, with a mute appeal in her eyes to Ada to ask the necessary question. Ada played up:

"Is your lady marrying Mr. Veere then?"

"Some time in December, I believe. The day ain't settled, for the earl don't want it announced till—I'm sure I don't know what it is exactly—something about business. Mr. Veere's business. Seems as if he was in some sort of hole—something that'll pass off. He's a queer sort of man, though he's rich."

"Is he odd?" Again Ada spoke. Betsey vowed gratitude.

"Well, it's an uncomfortable sort of business—not my idea of an engagement, somehow! He's just as nice to everybody as he is to her, and more so. She cries about it sometimes, and she was never a crier! It's my belief he's never kissed her properly except once when he proposed—in the drawing-room of our flat, and Lady Maude was there, actually, in the room! They call themselves modern, and that, but even modern is human, and if you don't hole-and-corner over an engagement, when do you? And an earl's daughter too—so off-hand, not treating her respectful, I think!"

"It seems a queer way to manage things," Ada said, adding triumphantly, "And I say this, if he don't care to kiss her or be with her alone, it won't come to nothing."

"Well, he gave her an engagement ring. They went and bought it themselves. He gave Lady Maude cart-blank. It's a queer sort of stone, an archimandrite they call it, green by day and red by night—not a proper engagement ring at all. And although the engagement isn't announced, she can wear

it fast enough, for no one would ever take it for an engagement ring, I say."

"Why isn't the engagement to be announced?" said Mrs. Altamont, whose voice shook.

"I told you, didn't I? There's what you call a pretender. Mr. Brooks was telling me, saying that the late Sir Joris Veere was married after all, and that the other man says he can prove it. The business is a company now—they can't stop Mr. Veere being one of the managers, anyhow. But still, it's a lot of money to change hands, isn't it, if Mr. Veere was to lose his case?"

"I should be sorry," said Ada, with simple emphasis. "Mr. Veere's been kind to me—putting me in here, and all."

"It isn't at all likely. Mr. Brooks says the other man hasn't a ghost of a chance. Just good money wasted—his bringing the action, but he's going to have a good try for it, I'm told. Would he keep you on, Mrs. Cox? You've got a nice place of it, haven't you? Pity if you was to lose it! Nothing to do but spin a tale about the old place once a week to the people who come. And visitors too, as much as you like. Your friend here is getting a nice blow, after London. You are a Londoner, aren't you, Mrs.——"

"Mrs. Adamson. I'm Mrs. Cox's sister-in-law."

"And I'm sure I hope this place will do you good. You don't look well, for all you've got such a nice colour. Rather nervous, aren't you? Circulation not very good, I expect. Do you get chilblains? My lady does—cruel, in the winter, and a bit of a red nose, too, at times. We have to be very careful!"

"Yes, I saw her come home from riding yesterday with a nose the colour of beetroot," said poor Betsey.

Ada thought the little ebullition of spite dangerous, and lest Miss Parker resented it, hastened to add:

"She looks nice in the saddle."

"Yes. She's only just taken to that since she's been en-

gaged. Mr. Veere stood her the lessons and gave her the horse. But he's never rode with her. Mr. Lee-Brice does, now —in the Park. Isn't he a fine figure of a man ? "

Betsey cordially agreed. She had had enough. She withdrew her magnetism, and soon the loquacious creature took her departure and was literally blown across the courtyard, with her mincing London steps.

XXVI

Betsey, coolly turning the matter over in her little haunted bedroom, where she had gone after Miss Parker's departure to ascertain if that lady's remarks about her circulation bore the further implication of a red nose, absolved Veere from any double dealing in the matter of his engagement. He had probably proposed to Lady Dobrée before coming to Angernoune, while Betsey was absorbed in the task of getting rid of Worksop House in Ada's interest and selling the furniture. She had been too busy to see him. 'Twas loneliness had tossed him to Lady Dobrée's breast. She honestly acknowledged to herself, moreover, that Mr. Veere had been more or less engaged to the girl at a date long prior to their first meeting in Charlton churchyard.

It was sharp practice, though. She could not sleep, but lay tangled in her golden hair, crying through it, stifling her sobs in it, drawing meshes of it across her burning eyes.

Half-way through the night her dismay culminated in an access of hysteria. She sobbed and shrieked and bit her pillow. Then she sat up, leaned forward and touched old Ginger, the cat, that professional soother of the *ménage* of Worksop House, who lay curled up at the foot of the bed. He murmured pellucid response, a loving gurgle—no more. It comforted her a little. It was her one reaching-out for sympathy.

Ada, who knew her heart, also knew better than to console.

Next day Betsey took Billy and went to the Bear Rocks to get shells. When they were on the beach, she let the little boy go

barefoot, and imitated him, and they went paddling in and out of the little pools, like eyes with lids of yellow sand, that lie in the crevices of the long reefs of basaltic rocks half a mile from Angernoune. Walking like this, the distance was as good as doubled. Billy with his short legs might get tired, so she presently anchored him at a single-handed game in one of the eight little sandy coves that intersect the Bear Rocks, each one hidden from and as beautiful as the other. She had no hat—she seldom wore one—and she had let her hair down, half savage, half swagger, and left her hairpins in charge of Billy, while she looked to see what shells might linger in the next bay, having thoroughly explored the first.

She came suddenly upon Mr. Lee-Brice, his great length stretched out full as he pored over the golden sand, intent on the same innocent quest as herself. Betsey stopped, looking down on him, a little but not deeply confused.

He thought he had never seen—or imagined—such lovely feet, with nails as pink and polished as the tiny winged shells he was even now collecting, prying them out of the fine fringe of coal that lay like a moustache on the lips of the strand. He gazed at the fair feet boldly, they were nearer to his line of vision than her face. And they were at least as beautiful.

Lee-Brice was a man of tact. He did not at any time outrage conventionality, he treated it cavalierly, and knew how to be indiscreet without indiscretion. Rising to his full height, dignified, graceful, easy, for he was a man in his prime, he addressed Betsey, after due pause for consideration of her beauty. He did not call her goddess ; with royal facility he remembered her name :

" Mrs. Adamson, have you ever seen this shell ? It is very rare." He held it out to her, giving its Latin name.

" No, never. I didn't know you were a——"

" Conchologist ? "

"—As well as a novelist." She got out the little complimentary phrase with a shyness that charmed him, and con-

tinued to charm him as she went on : " I have read your novel. I have even got a copy."

" Have you, indeed ? Then stick to it," he said, laughing. " You know what happened to that book ? "

" Yes. It *was* a shame ! We all talked of nothing else at——"

" Where ? "

" Where I lived."

" There are three copies in the Castle, then," said he, respecting her reticence, though, author-like, he would have enjoyed hearing the data for his popularity. " Lady Maude Erskine-Robertson—the lady I ' shed ' the other day and came back to see over the Castle properly with you—has one, and Lady Dobrée de Saye."

" It isn't a book for her at all."

" You are quite right. But the young girls of the present day are too quick for us. They seem to shin up the ladder of the Impossible and Improper while we still stand with one foot on the lower rungs. Luckily, the younger they are, the less it hurts them. You see they have not begun to think in colour yet."

" How do you mean ? "

" As a line drawing or a Flaxman outline—to a Titian or a Tintoretto, is the young girl's consciousness—to yours, say ? You understand me ? Lines have no corporeality. Nature has no outlines, only washes of colour blocked in, grey or gorgeous as the case may be. Virtue in the next block to sin, is only demarcated by delicate differences of hue. So only you may know water from wine, the lamb from the wolf—and the last two are apt to lie down together—in society, at least."

" Then if only one's mind is like those empty whitewashed paddocks one sees at railway stations before you put the sheep and the goats in them, one can read your novels with impunity ? "

" Yes, as long as one remains unable to fill up the blanks—put words for the asterisks ! But enough of my contributions to contemporary literature. Tell me, do you know that charming fellow, our host, who is engaged to supply the colour scheme for Lady Dobrée ? Pure accident—that engagement ! "

She winced. " Yes. I have spoken to him. Why do you say their engagement is pure accident ? "

" Because I saw him at a man's dinner the night before Maude Erskine-Robertson faked that engagement, and I never knew a man less likely to make a woman an offer next day."

" Did he think in line only, then, too ? "

" Ah, no, he's mature enough. . . . But he was describing to me the type he admired, and it wasn't hers. It was more like yours. . . . He considers Romney's Lady Hamilton to be the highest female type of beauty."

" That is no guide," said she, quickly. " Men who admire the fair type always marry dark women, just as women swear they like a clean-shaven man, and then go and marry an imperial ! When is Mr. Veere due to come here ? "

" This afternoon."

" No, is he ? "

" Yes, he wired suddenly to the butler—old Brooks—do you know him ? And Lady Dobrée wanted the motor, both motors, in fact, to go over to Kelso. So he's to be met in the bus. Poor Veere, who simply can't bear crawling ! "

" Yes, I do think he might have been allowed to have one of his own conveyances to bring him to his own place," she replied nervously. They had walked on and now they came to the shielded cove where Billy's intent head could be seen. He was having a dinner-party of shells on a bit of smooth golden sand. The ugly part of wading—shoes and stockings, of which the prettiest exemplars will look squalid, deprived of their context, lay near him. His and Betsey's. Lee-Brice

tactfully touched his hat and was making off, when a cry of the heart arrested him.

"You little villain, what have you done with all my hairpins? I left them here on this bit of rock——"

"I made 'em all into boats and fish hooks," said Billy, thus objurgated and mildly shaken. "And they wouldn't float and they're at the bottom of the pool."

"Which pool?"

The child indicated a neighbouring cranny, deep and secret, and Lee-Brice came to the rescue.

"I'll dredge them up for you, while you put on your shoes and stockings again, if I may?"

Five minutes later he reappeared, with a small handful of hairpins, to find Betsey shod and demure, but with her lovely hair still spread over her shoulders.

"Are these all?" he asked.

"Enough to work the ship, I dare say," said Betsey, using them with celerity. Lee-Brice watched her, appreciatively, but not impertinently, and finally proposed to walk home with her.

His dripping shirt cuff, earned in her service, was a strong argument in favour of her acceptance of his escort, besides it was not like Betsey to object, although her heart was torn in two by the news that had been given her the night before by Lady Dobrée's maid, and the excitement of an imminent meeting with Ernest Veere. She never disdained the present for the future, or one man for another.

Ernest Veere, in the station bus, drove past them in the village. He saw Betsey and the author delicately stepping it along the road up to the Castle, but scrupled to follow his first cordial impulse to get out and join them. He betrayed his motion, however, by a quick forward movement of his hand to the check string. Thinking better of it, he fell back, nodded to them both, and was slowly bowled on.

Betsey was in a silent flutter. Mr. Lee-Brice, who noticed it,

began to converse with judgment, and tactful absence of direct questioning.

"The charm of Ernest Veere's face," he observed, "lies in his open yet cute smile. He always, somehow, reminds me of cutlery—of some serviceable tool, shiny, smooth, and pre-eminently efficient."

"Do you mean a bradawl?" inquired Betsey, laughing. She was terribly excited. She did not care what names she called Veere. She was to see him in a short while—an hour, two hours—at all events, that very evening.

"He's an extraordinarily clever young fellow," pursued the author. "It's almost a pity he's got all that money—he might have done so much without it!"

"What, for instance?"

"Married the right woman, for one thing! A woman who would have nothing to 'get over' in him!"

"What has Lady Dobrée to get over? He doesn't eat peas with his knife, I suppose?"

"Of course not! He's all right in those things. Something far more subtle than that. You're quite clever enough to understand. He jars, believe me. It's so funny to watch them."

"Quite a privilege!" replied Betsey, sourly. "Poor Mr. Veere!"

The author was carrying her into fields where her natural wit had no play. She herself was too rough and ready to envisage those subtle pitfalls imminent in daily intercourse with Lady Dobrée and her set which beset the self-made man, and Lee-Brice missed her sure-footed criticisms and comments on the kind of workaday life she knew best. He did not choose to let her wallow any more in sloughs of incompetent spite. She was a very pretty thing, and deserved her millionaire, whom he would help her to get, furthering at the same time a not altogether inchoate scheme of his own.

Half an hour later the unused key grated in the door that

connected the smart Dwelling House with the stern Keep, and Mr. Veere, cheerful, smiling and expansive, was with Ada, Betsey and Billy.

"Good luck! They're across the border and away, I hear, so I've got my freedom till dinner-time."

"I think she ought to have stayed to receive you, when she knew you were coming!" Betsey said.

"Rather not! I purposely misled her. She didn't know I was coming till to-morrow. I arranged it all with Brookie. How do you like Brookie, Betsey? He's an old faithful dear, isn't he? Yes, Billy, my son, that's for you—and this! And this is for your mother!"

"Oh, thank you, sir—indeed," said Mrs. Cox. "And for Billy too." She took her son's hand and negligently left the room. Lately she had grown a delicate sense of not being wanted.

"Well, Elisabetta, are you happy here? I needn't ask. I saw you escorted by the greatest novelist of the day up the hill, I saw your golden hair shining in the setting sun—very casually, but effectively, done up. And so did he, you bet! The cheek of you—wearing no hat! Well, at any rate, you're having a good time, and I'm delighted to see it! Do you like the naughty author?"

"Mr. Lee-Brice has very nice modest manners, hasn't he?" she said demurely, "for a man who writes books that—well, books that every gentleman's library should be without!"

"Ha, ha! A very decent chap all the same, don't you think? And a regular Crœsus. Why, the royalties on his book alone——"

"The one they've suppressed?"

"No, he doesn't get any more on that. But the one before—the one they made a play of—that brings in a few good thousands a year. I declare he's a better *parti* than I, if only the fair Dobrée's advisers would let her see it. Especially

now, when I don't know if I mayn't be chucked out of house and home by the turn of the law ! "

" The law ! It's not cleverness needed to keep you in, but right. Either that pretender is your uncle's son or he isn't."

" I believe he's faked a register or something. And if the finding is on his side, I shall only have my wits."

" They're excellent ones. Mr. Lee-Brice says that you could do anything you liked. He even says that you would do better without any money at all ! "

The cute smile glittered.

" Does he expect me to make a handsome present of my wealth to any one ? To him, say ? Then he could marry Dobrée. Is that what he's after ? "

" But I thought you were going to marry Lady Dobrée ? " she asked innocently. " Every one about here says you are."

" That's the idea ! " he replied uneasily. Was she going to reproach him for his engagement, and the march he had stolen on his promise ? He cared so much for her opinion on everything, more than for that of any other person in the world, excepting himself, that he was actually driven in his own despite to ask her in so many words what she thought of the step he had taken.

She primmed her full sweet lips; it was a little drop of balm in the draught of bitterness, and she wanted to enjoy it to the full.

But Veere hated any approximation, on the mouth of a woman dear to him, to the disturbing smile of Monna Lisa. " Are you quite sure you don't object to anything ? " he insisted.

" To what ? Everything's quite nice here, I think. Good air—lovely sands, only I wish they had run to electric light in the Keep——"

" No, no, my engagement, I mean. I had to settle that in London——"

" Before you got here ? Practical, as ever."

He gave her up. " Practical, yes, and so is the girl's father

—won't have it announced until the pretender is disposed of. Full of schedules and mortgages and what not. Oh, they're an awful lot! She's the bright spot in the family. Would you believe it, he doesn't like me to take her name!"

"He is right. A Norman name wouldn't suit you at all!"

"Now, that's the first delightful bit of spite you've shown, Betsey. Quite warms the cockles of my heart! But I'm afraid, my dear, it will have to be, for I mean to stick to that point and get my own way. I shall have old Angernoune under my thumb as soon as the gentleman calling himself Ernest Louis Veere is safely disposed of, as he will be. We've retained the best heads in England. We can't fail. And I shall be a cad with a Norman name. Am I a cad, Betsey?"

"I've heard people call you a bounder."

"Oh, I say!" His face fell.

"It's not so bad as cad, that you're trying to call yourself. It doesn't, at any rate, mean anything dishonourable."

"One who bounds, merely. Do I bound, Betsey? I should have thought I was too busy and too hard-worked, and not self-indulgent enough. Besides that wretched word's often the last arrow in the quiver of people who are too slack, too weakly, too fastidious to get on. It's an easy thing to say—the sort of reproach you hurl at a Labour Member with a majority of a few hundred behind him! . . . You see I come back to the House—I can't get away from the House. I'm so keen to be in it. I can't settle down to be a mere manufacturer with a headpiece like mine. Yes, my head's got to get me into the House, with a little adroit jockeying of social values and carl's daughters thrown in. Betsey, isn't it a fair game? They're pretty overweening, one has the right to get the better of them, don't you think? Say so, if you can!"

"I should think it quite fair if only you were prepared to give rather better value for your title. I don't mean money, I think you'll be generous about that, but I mean that poor little Lady Dobrée wants something more."

His head dropped on to his hands.

"Betsey, I can't. Positively, I can't. And that's the weak, the mean point in my scheme."

"Is it me?" she asked frankly. "For if it is, I could go."

"No, I desire you as a woman, if you must have it, but I hold on to you still more as a pal. Don't desert me, please. You would do her no good, and your going would send me off my head, I believe. Stay here, and let me come and talk things over with you sometimes, as I am doing now. I am very amenable. You must admit I don't persecute you by making love to you. Since I cannot—may not—I am resigned to see Lee-Brice doing it, or any other fellow you like to take on."

"Yes, you must really let me manage my own affairs—of the heart. But would you like to explain how you came to take the plunge, and then I can see if Mr. Lee-Brice was speaking the truth?"

"Oh, did he talk about it, the beggar?"

"No, you talked to him. You mentioned the type of beauty you happened to admire."

"Yours, of course," said the young man, simply. "But I hope he hasn't twigged."

"Oh, no. You said too many kind things for the portrait to be recognised. I've gone off sadly. Hair three shades darker——!"

"Nonsense! Pure gold wire, spun glass, floss silk, all the nice things they can possibly call hair. But about Dobrée, you wanted to know. . . . Well, I proposed to her one day in July, during that week when you were too busy packing up and so on, to see me."

"I know," she murmured sombrely. "I took my eye off you for one minute and——"

"Oh, I know you disapprove. But—I don't know how it was, I seemed to get myself fixed up for life in a sort of unamorous fury, the business-devil driving me, don't you

know! He does ride me sometimes—he's an inherited devil, of course, he made all this—— !"

He waved his hand to indicate the artificial mounds and stiffly laid out rock gardens of Angernoune.

"I knew I was down in his book to commit this error, or act of wisdom—what you will, and I thought to myself, 'Oh, come, damn, let's get it over!' Lots of fellows, it's my firm belief, scuffle into it like that! They get hypnotised by the notion of the general suitability of an engagement—it grows to seem a thing that's got to be, like confirmation——"

"Or death?"

"If you like. Well, I went to call at the flat, and I said—something leading, I suppose. They had got me into that sort of mood——"

"They?"

"Lady Maude and Dobrée. It was in that horrid upholsterer's Louis Quinze room of Dobrée's, all flowers and frames and cushions and hot cakes—you seem to be swimming in an atmosphere of spooniness the moment the ribbony maid closes the door on you, and Dobrée was less arrogant than usual. It might even be called yielding. Then Lady Maude, who was more or less about, took good care to clinch it—told the sun to stand still upon Gibeon, don't you know, until I'd made Dobrée mine—and left the room. Not before she'd, as it were, knocked our two heads together in an engagement kiss. So I had to stand to it, and pretend I was thoroughly in the picture, which I wasn't. I was in *your* picture."

"Then I think you did very wrong. And now—she cries herself sick about your backwardness—so her maid says."

"What can I do? It's only three weeks ago. I've given her a ring, two kisses and a dozen riding lessons. If she can't stand me, she can chuck me. Ha, ha! Perhaps that's what I'm driving at all the time?"

Betsey's eyes lightened, glanced, and were cast down.

This terrible off-hand conversation represented her informal trial of the man who had failed her. He was to stand or fall by these jerky, ill-chosen sentences, and half-meant, ill-chosen expressions of apology. It was enough for her. His nervous laughter was music to her ears. He passed and repassed her in a constant cell-like walk, and her hands sketched a grasping gesture now and again.

He went on :

" I don't formulate any plan. And yet—there does seem a kind of barbaric honour in making her find me inadequate, isn't there ? She has got a bad bargain—a man who doesn't really care for her. That would be the only sort of thing she would ever throw me over for—if she ever did, something personal, something that hurts her poor little pride. She's proud, though she loves money. Whereas, if I lost the case and all my money, I believe I should positively have to bash her to make her give me up. You can't tell, but that's my idea of her. And I ought to know her pretty well ? "

" You don't know her a bit—any more than I do. I confess I don't think there's much to know. But one thing I'm certain of, and that is, that though you're every sort of dear yourself, your attitude in this is simply that of a cad."

" Hold on ! . . . Betsey, no ; you may shake your pretty head till your pretty hair comes down—as it has !—but you'll not convince me that I'm a cad. I'm not ! I'm not ! Human beings, when it comes to the real big things, can't order their lives on conventions. Those are all right for merely social difficulties——"

" But that," she said quickly, " is just where bounderishness comes in. You can't afford to stop being a gentleman the moment the drawing-room door closes behind you. It's so easy not to drop your " h " s, or eat peas with your knife—so much more difficult to realise your attitude to other people, when to indulge, when to resent, how much you are bound to give for nothing, and how little to take even when it is due

to you. And with Lady Dobrée, where your liabilities are so ill-defined——"

"Yes, Betsey, you talk very well; but still, that sort of thing comes outside of oneself somehow. It's all a question of markets, even with an earl's daughter. And I say that we are nothing but brute beasts at bottom in a world that's over-populated, and that the moment the struggle for life sets in, it takes precedence of everything!"

"Even of honour," she said bitterly, taking away her hand from his. She rose from her seat and caressed Ada's geraniums in the window. "*Fais ce que peux*—not *dois*, that is the bounder's gospel. Ernest, did you ever hear of the gentleman wrecked, and clinging to a plank in mid-ocean, who took his hands off and preferred to drown rather than incommode a lady?"

"Oh, dear," he groaned, catching her to him and burying his face in the folds of her dress. "Be kind to me, even if I am a cad."

She looked down on him with grave tenderness. "Let us call it an opportunist!" she murmured.

He raised his head.

"I say, who taught you to use such long words? Your latest, Lee-Brice?"

XXVII

The evening closed in. The windows of the Dwelling House began to twinkle meretriciously, one single beam of light from Ada Cox's ill-trimmed lamp was all that came from the lone Keep. The newly returned master of Angernoune was making merry with his friends, after their own style. They were all " dressing up " for charades, rummaging in everybody's rooms for the wrong clothes; the run on ladies' nightgowns was tremendous. Even Miss Parker's modest wardrobe was pressed into the service. Shrieks of joy accompanied every fresh travesty. Lady Maude led the revels ; she had, it was said, the right figure for it.

The two sad, solitary women took up their position in the guardroom on the ground floor of the Keep, and gazed out through the archer slits pierced in the thickness of the wall. They perched themselves each in her separate embrasure—Ada with her boy squeezed up into the narrow space beside her—and surveyed the empty space, like a stage, set between the two buildings, and listened to the eldritch screeches that greeted Lord Vallance's appearance as the Lorelei, swathed in Lady Maude's Paris lingerie, Lee-Brice as Lady Wellington's, and Lady Maude herself as Mephistopheles, an airy costume she never travelled without, for it took so little room. The performance wound up with the horrors of a Channel passage, enacted by Lord and Lady Blessington.

The noises ceased. Betsey and Ada, cramped in their unnatural positions, prepared to abandon them. But

the door of the Dwelling House was softly opened, and by common consent they remained to see the play played out.

White figures stole forth ; bare arms posed on black coat-sleeves indicated the manly prop that, shadow-like, supported them. The crushed shells of the drive crackled under satin-shod feet, and the red glow of cigarettes began to light up the dark *encoignures* of the walls. No one cared to walk on the damp strip of lawn except Lady Dobrée.

Ghost-like, in her long clinging white dress, she paced up and down, backwards and forwards, on the wet grass, clinging to the arm of Ernest Veere, stooping over him a little, for she was slightly taller than he. It gave her a possessive air which angered Mrs. Cox. Passionate arrows of ill-will sped from her eyes on behalf of her friend, and she muttered jerkily :

" He's giving her his arm ! If he cared for her, he'd take hers. Don't I know? . . . Silly fool ! Letting her good dress trail on the wet grass to show him she's got another to put on when that one's spoiled."

" She hasn't got another," Betsey murmured from her neighbouring window. " I guess that's why she's marrying him. And he knows it."

She thought she hated Ernest. She had taken to comparing him with Wilfrid. She compared him to his disadvantage. The wife of a murderer—no doubt ! Better that than the promised bride of a bounder ! It had a finer sound. She preferred it.

(Where had they got to now? They had left the grass plot ?)

Crime, yes ; but a reckless, dare-devil crime, followed by a noble attempt at suicide, thwarted by the grandmotherly Law of England which took no count of honourable obligations that should have been allowed their proper fulfilment. Wilfrid had wished to pay his debt to society, he had offered a

life for a life ! There was something fine, after all, in the way he had, without a moment's hesitation, turned his weapon on himself.

Those magnificent specimens of the criminal class who had lived here in the old days, who had trodden the very floor of this room she was in, and had sat there drinking success to their depredations, would have done honour to Wilfrid. Or rather, they would have thought nothing of the deed for which Wilfrid was even now languishing in prison. They would not have stuck at twenty such deeds done in the name of revenge or self-aggrandisement. But surely the stern, bearded buccaneers would have turned away in sick loathing of the slick opportunism, the vague, intangible immoralities of the heir that the might of money, not the power of the sword, had foisted on their stormy record of grandeur.

(Where had they got to? Everybody had gone in, he must have slipped in also ?)

Her limbs ached. She climbed down from the window and invited Ada to do so too. The two women put the little boy to bed, both kissed him, both tucked him in, and heard his prayers. By common consent they spoke only to the child, not to each other, except to say good night. Betsey swiftly sought her little bedroom in the roof, and opening her window looked out.

It had turned out a horrid night. There were no stars. There was no moon. The air was full of damp, clinging particles of moisture. Betsey realised that the sea-fret was creeping up slowly, biting in and in, enveloping the coast in a sea-borne winding sheet. They would be enwrapped for hours and hours. The human being in her realised with some actual distress her mere physical obliteration. This little horde of uncongenial persons fortuitously grouped on the Castle rock would be isolated in a short while from the rest of the world. They would all be shut in together with their

plans, their dislikes, and their sins. Horrible, that she should be boxed up with a Lady Dobrée!

A few lights still burned in the Dwelling House. Wearied out with forced jollity, the house party had at last sought its curtained rooms, and was undressing in the mock daylight of electricity. Not a member of it had probably even thought of looking out into the night.

Betsey's wide sash window, set by the early Victorian innovator, had no curtains. She laid her elbows on the sill and looked out moodily on the dark blue stage cloths hung before her, seemingly soft textured, fraught with a grey bloom, like the stuff of a woman's woollen gown. . . .

Her earnest gaze could not penetrate the night. Six hundred feet below, at the foot of the Castle steep, the girdling waters lay very close, she knew, for the tide was high. But she could not even make out the faint line of breaking waves that would indicate the serrated coast line to the north, or the shores of Holystone, the island a mile or more out to sea, where cormorant families in thousands nest and cover the ground like a crowd of castaway sailors. It was all dark, dark, and silent too—not the sound of the tiniest wave that breaks futilely over a jutting promontory could come to her, here alone, perched on the rock of Angernoune.

She shivered, as the rank cold mist from the crawling waters rose, as it were, to a slow measure, and enveloped the mound on which she abode, lapping it round with its sleeping folk, in a soft blanket veil of weltering vapours, made of all the tears that had ever been shed by women, weeping, brooding over the woes of the world that they cannot prevent or stay. . . . For women see so well how it is, the wilful exercise of strength that leads men to set their wits against each other, the remorse, the suffering as of chidden, headstrong children, when the battle is to the stronger, as it must be, and the Wilfrids of life are forced to the wall.

Poor Wilfrid, whom she had always refused to visit in his prison! Wilfrid, the man who had never had a chance—so Ada who loved him and saw him truly, had always said—poor Ada, who would have gone to see him like a shot, had she been permitted or even invited! Wilfrid, after the first moment, had never asked for her. The shock, they said, had wiped her from his mind.

. . . . . .

Betsey slept, her slumbers soured and saddened by an importunate dream of Wilfrid. It was a vivid dream. If she had been Ada Cox she would certainly have gone down to breakfast swearing that she had actually seen the man sitting, bowed and bent, in his cell, his thin, transparent hands fumbling with the collar of his shirt—intent on nothing, after the manner of madmen. . . . But Betsey knew that she would have the strength of mind not to tell her dream; she would keep the secret of her new-found pity to herself, out of consideration for the weaker human vessel.

"I have neither Faith nor Hope," she thought to herself as she dressed. "But I believe I have gained Charity. . . ."

She hugged her new-found virtue. She felt a little happier. And when she looked out of the window, as she had done overnight, the wall of vapour still faced her as before, but it was trembling and white. And as she gazed, spikes of daylight as yellow as her hair seemed to pierce the thin veils of mist and part them. The lazy, reluctant films receded, were wafted off in parcels of milky radiance, that a gay, imperative dawn was breaking and pushing away. . . .

She stood there tranced, watching this ordinary process of nature till all ambiguity was gone from everything. Old, grey, but undismayed, the rock of Angernoune reappeared from the wrack, like an ancient faith assailed, but unabashed. The Keep commanded anew the shore for miles, a beacon for night-worn mariners, that were even now, some

of them, holding their hands before their eyes to realise with joy their grizzled landmark standing firm another day.

She clapped her watch on to her breast, slipped her rings over her finger, and ran along the narrow stone-flagged passages that led from her room to the twisting turret stair that was the only way to the ground floor. As she passed down along its windings she caught sight, through the slits that served for windows, of a section of the drive in front where the mica and quartz glistered in the sun like silver, of the sodden patch of grass, set with fairy rings, beyond, where Boris, the dog, already bounding and awake, lay couched for a spring.

Her husband's child called her in his fresh young voice.

"A letter! Two whole letters for you, Auntie Betsey. With O.H.M.S. on them both!"

Her mood changed. . . .

About ten o'clock every one in the Dwelling House agreed that this was going to be a day of days for Angernoune. The sun was shining brilliantly, the air was mild, soft breezes blew in from the sea. No one realised that all last night they had lain enwrapped in a thick shroud of mist, that their dying cries would have been stifled, and their eyes sealed with impermeable vapours, and that for a few hours they had been as one with sea and sky. Later on, they had looked out of carefully upholstered windows and seen the world was good. The ladies agreed that it was at last a day that justified the summer frocks that had lain so far unused, but not forgotten, in trunks and wardrobes until they should appear seasonable. Sparkling in white linens, quaking, some of them, in furtive muslins, for the wind was still fresh, the members of Lady Dobrée's house-party, their hands full of novels and newspapers, tripped up the steep stone staircase that led to a favoured coign of the brand new battlements. They bestowed themselves in one of the wide embrasures with circular stone seats that had been arranged at intervals along

the line of it by a beneficent architect. To keep up the military effect an effete cannon stood in each, its muzzle defying a seaward enemy.

It was cold, all the same. People drifted away for constitutionals. Soon Lady Dobrée and Lady Maude, with Lee-Brice and their host for attendant cavaliers, alone were left.

Lady Maude's eyes wandered to the door of the Keep, where an etiolated little boy was playing, timidly throwing a ball now and then for the dog to catch, and as timidly retreating from the wild rushes his gesture provoked. She remarked, idly :

" That's a nice pair of women you've chartered to keep the Keep, Ernest. I often notice them flitting about. I'm quite jealous. The dark one is like an overworked Burne-Jones, and the other like a Romney—later period. Gone to seed, rather—blowzy ! "

" Yes," Lee-Brice agreed with her, leaving the looks of Mrs. Cox out of account. " The Romney's is not a beauty that will last. But she is splendid now. A queer type—full of discordants. Her colouring is so vivid, yet soft ; the lines of her face are so defined as to be almost hard in effect. There's no shading, no gradation about the curves, the cavities of the eye sockets are extraordinarily clean cut and sharp. Then those velvety, dark, arched eyebrows, over bold blue eyes, that fine bow-shaped mouth and Greek nose remind me of the best Lady Hamiltons ! And her hair with its two shades——"

" —Shows she doesn't dye it ! " said Lady Maude, generous, but bored to death.

The author went on : " I was looking at it as she sat on the rocks with me a few days ago." Lady Maude raised her eyebrows. " It was so like the shading of the basalt—gold and tawny, with deep strong shadows——"

" You appear to admire her ? "

" Yes—as much as I admire anything so full blown," said he, with a glance at Lady Dobrée's pure null profile, with

its Roman nose and touching angularities of cheek. "She had a child with her," he added in a vaguely explanatory manner.

"It's not hers, it's Mrs. Cox's, the dark one's," said Dobrée. "It's not a bad-looking child either—reminds me of some one I know, somehow. But I suppose it's like its papa. That is if she's really married. So many people aren't. Where's Mr. Cox?"

"Is the Romney married too?" Lady Maude asked Ernest Veere, disregarding this flippant excursion of the *ingenue* into her own province.

"I haven't inquired," said he, plausibly. "Mrs. Cox just asked me if she might have her sister-in-law down here for a change of air, and I said yes. Perhaps—she may be married, of course—wife of a poor clerk, I should think?"

"If once you come to think, I wonder you don't get to know!" said Dobrée severely, and Veere realised that he was protesting too much.

"I must go and start the Blessingtons at croquet," he said hastily. "Boris has chewed all the balls and made them uneven, and there are about six blades of grass each for them to roll on." He departed, and the girl looked after him, and then back at Lady Maude, who had turned to the novelist and was wagging her finger at him.

"Wordy!" she said. "He admires the Lady of the Keep; I have a *flair* in these matters. That's all rubbish about her being Mrs. Cox's sister-in-law. You look out, Mr. Lee-Brice, and take fewer walks with basaltic-haired chatelaines, or you'll find yourself trespassing on some one else's preserves."

Dobrée looked puzzled, a little annoyed at her chaperon's crudity. She stood, poised on one foot, anxious to leave them, anxious to hear more.

"I suppose," she said humbly "there is a something about women like that——"

"Something—a *je ne sais quoi*, that makes for unrighteous-

ness ! " said Lee-Brice, laughing. But there were tears in the young girl's eyes as she turned away.

" Something that makes for men, I suppose you mean ? " said Lady Maude, brusquely, for she saw the tears. She was really fond of the girl whose fortunes she had a bet on, and disliked to see her teased. " Oh, he'll *ranger* himself ! That kind of man does. He'll have every bourgeois virtue—soon. Dobrée, why don't you go and take a hand at croquet ? They seem to want a fourth badly."

The girl got up and obeyed. Lady Maude turned to the author and spoke to him seriously.

" My dear soul, you shouldn't worry that poor girl about her man ! Don't you see, poor little wire-haired terrier that she is, that she's now come bang against life, and doesn't know what to make of it ? She's got all a woman's tribulations, and no savvy at all. She can't manage her engagement in the very least."

" It's such an impossible engagement. And she is, as you say, a sweet, straight, undeveloped piece of mechanism, with only one slide to her little lantern. I thought that blue tear I saw in her eye as she ran off adorable. She wept it because the strands of her hair are all one colour, like the strands of her soul. There's no more twist in the woof and warp of that child's heart than will suffice to keep it together. Now the other, the Lady of the Keep——"

" Mrs. Adamson ? "

" —Has lived."

" With Ernest ? I hope not. By the way, talking of him, did you see in the paper this morning that that murderer—you know, what was his name—the man that shot old Sir Joris, has at last succeeded in committing suicide ? They found him in his cell with his throat cut with a rusty nail he got hold of, and he's not expected to live this time. Don't you remember at the time of the trial how Ernest *afficher'd* himself with the wife ? Every one was talking about it and trying to get a

sight of her, but all they could find out was that she had yellow hair. That they saw through the thick veil she sported. And he was always flashing by all his friends in a motor, breaking the speed limit so that we shouldn't see who it was he had with him. It's all over now, of course, but we were so afraid once he was going to marry the widow as soon as her husband was hanged. But it's blown over, luckily. I suppose when he got penal servitude for life she subsided into the suburbs again."

"Which was her particular suburb, do you remember?"

"I can't remember. Stop, was it Wimbledon? But, of course, it won't make any difference now. Dobrée has really got Ernest, if she cares to stick to it. Do you know, I think I've stood the wind long enough. Let us go down."

Halting, impeded by skirts, maimed by high heels, she clambered down from the battlement, and lightly took the author's arm till, as they passed the door of the Keep, she paused and hung all her weight on to it.

"Wait a moment. I wonder if it is only the effect of the wind howling round these old corners? To me it sounds exactly like a woman crying. I hear it most distinctly, don't you?"

"It is probably a child in disgrace. His Romney aunt has whipped the Burne-Jones nephew, probably. She looks a bit of a Tartar. Come along, dear lady," he persuaded Lady Maude, who seemed disposed to linger, for she took a morbid interest in the two women that lived in the Keep. "I fancy it's not a case for sympathy. Morning noises are always squalid, never tragic."

XXVIII

"Oh, Betsey, Betsey, you're a widow now!"

The mistress of Altamont wept bitterly as she looked over his wife's shoulder, and read the official missive that coldly set forth the fact that Wilfrid Adamson, alias Altamont, had taken his life in prison. There were two communications from the Home Office. The one had been delayed in transit; the new tenant of Worksop House had been in no hurry to forward it. It invited Betsey Altamont to come at once to her husband, who was not expected to live, as a result of his third attempt at suicide. . . .

Would Betsey have gone? Oh, yes, she would, she would! She had been thinking of him all the night past, the night preceding his decease, the night preceding his actual decease, when he most thought of her.

She managed to conceal the first telegram from Ada, and nursed her shame and remorse in stony silence. She had no tears. Ada, grown wise in her beloved rival's psychology, took no umbrage and wept for two. Her wails were heard outside the walls of the Keep. Luckily, however, by no one but the Lady Maude, adroitly side-tracked by Mr. Lee-Brice.

By midday the simple creature had, as it were, wept herself out; her tears were for the moment dried up at the source. She sat about in an untidy heap, made herself innumerable cups of tea, and seemed chiefly concerned to know Betsey's views on certain points connected with her dead husband.

With childish insistence she attempted to inform herself.

"Say you respect him now, Betsey! You once said you would think more of him if he took his own life!"

"Did I, dear? It sounds so awful. But I suppose that is what I meant. I do think less hardly of him."

"Bless you!" said the poor woman. "And, Betsey, will you wear mourning?"

"I daren't," said Betsey. "It might give it away. But let me see, you might slide a little black in somehow? . . . Your Sunday dress is black, isn't it? Mine is blue serge—very dark. The only thing is, and I am afraid it will upset you, you mustn't for your life put the child into black. That would be very marked."

"Mustn't I really? His own father!"

"We are pensioners of Mr. Veere, Ada, and we must be guided by his wishes. He doesn't want any one to know who we are—so there it is. I'm sorry."

"I think I'll make a cup of tea," said Ada, swallowing her disappointment and flying to her one panacea. "And what are you going to do after this, Betsey? Is it any good my arsking? You and Billy are all I've left to care for."

"I don't mind your asking, if I only knew myself."

"Are you going to America?"

"No, I'm off that."

"Don't mean to marry?"

"I think not."

"No, don't you marry again. Stay a widow. We'll be widows together—once marrying is enough. I talk as if I'd been married, don't I—and so I do feel as if I'd been married to the man that's dead. Oh, dear Betsey, you've been so kind, do you mind my saying that? It's cheek, I know."

"Nonsense, dear! Have I ever minded? You're a good sort, and as soon as I found that out, I've been quite willing to take cheek or anything else from you. I think we've both behaved fairly well over it all. Oh, my head!"

Ada brewed the tea and brought her a cup. Betsey put her hand up and clasped the kind one that was ministering to her.

"Ada, I'm miserable!" she said.

"Poor soul! It isn't about Wilfrid, either, is it?"

"No, not about Wilfrid."

"You can't take me in, can you?"

"Nor don't want to," said the other, spiritlessly. "You'll not do me any harm."

"Harm you, Betsey? Why, I'd go to my death for you, that's what I would do. If my death would give you your heart's desire—and I know well enough what that is—you should have it and welcome. What's that silly girl to him? You and him been to each other—what Wilfrid and I been to each other pretty near—or thereabouts, and why's she with her blasted title to come in and part them as has known each other like you two have—I say it's a shame!" She went away, muttering faint cockney curses.

Betsey saw that Ada Cox had formed the obvious and inevitable opinion as to her relations with the young man with whom she had been constantly intimate since the day of the funeral of Miss Altamont—with whom she had travelled abroad. . . . What else could Ada think, what else could anybody think who knew of it? She did not care to disabuse her. It was even a point of consolation that Ada, with her sad slum wisdom and hard and fast social code, should think no other form of alliance had been possible.

Later on in the afternoon she said:

"There's to be a high tide on the Bear Rocks this afternoon. They say the waves will be highest about five. I'll go down and see. It might cure my headache."

"Wind's bound to make it worse."

"Not this sort of headache. . . . No, I won't take Billy, he'd be a responsibility, and in this gale, it's not so easy for a grown-up person even to keep his footing on those rocks."

She tied a veil over her cap and hair, and like a drift of grey

smoke blown this way and that, made her way by the wind-swept links to the place where the waves ran reputedly highest and encountered most opposition in their onslaught on the land.

She could hardly get along. The wind was straight off the sea and Norway. It swished and wisped through the wooden slats of the railings of the golf course, it eddied in and out the sand-hills, mowing down and flattening the bents that seemed to lay their spines slavishly sideways against its onrush. The little hard pink balls of thrift growing where sand met grass bumped about and knocked each other, and the yellow ragwort growing by the reddened iron water of the little streams rattled and shook.

One of the vicar's nice boys—dear boys like grey whelps in their Jaeger flannels—she liked them—told her that the waves made a splendid show, and that the Castle party were all down there.

She hesitated for one moment, then she decided that she would attract no particular attention in her smoke-coloured wrappings. There were other people there too, the vicar and his wife, and some of the visitors. Everybody's eyes would be bleared by salt spray. Yes, she would go on. She needed all the exhilaration that savage Nature can give.

She passed the Castle party, staggering about absurdly on the reef of slippery, broken-up rock that flung itself out to sea, like an inky hand, which the white waves licked slavishly, continually. Again and again they rose in Kühleborn-like rushes, to be dissipated in falling water, as was Undine's ghostly waggoner, while the foam flecks flew out far down the wind and struck the lookers-on in the face. It was no place for idle seekers after sensation, for the elemental combat recked not of them, but laughed and covered them with flakes of ridicule.

The sea-charges grew more furious. The cold blue sky was splashed with the dirty brown spume. It was fully high tide.

Betsey had gone to the shelving end of the reef, where the waters spread out lasciviously as they retreated, baffled, and the suction oceanwards was enormous. A woman in despair goes far. The worst was comfort. The sea was kinder than the man she loved, sunk as he was in short-sighted ease, concerned in petty issues merely, complacently looking down the avenues of sophistication that led to his pale desire for a second-rate, cheap substitute for Life. . . .

Between her and Veere and his chosen friends there were now material barriers, tantamount to Alpine peaks and crevasses that Betsey, agile, had leaped across and poised on easily, like a kid. The town people had none of them seemingly got any balance. Lady Blessington, seized protectingly first by this man and then that, seemed to spin like a saffron-ulstered tee-to-tum; Lady Dobrée, thin and slight in her elegant dark-coloured tweeds, waved reed-like, and continually tried to prevent her wind-blown skirts from revealing her too far. Such was not Lady Maude's preoccupation. Ernest Veere, in yachting cap and sailor serge, stood by them both, ready to help if either were carried off her feet. A fall into some jagged chasm, set with bone-breaking spikes, would be the inevitable result, and even the place where the two women stood was none too secure.

Betsey was further out than any one of the spectators. There was in her case the added risk of being attained and carried out by a heavy back-wash of some eleventh wave. She dauntlessly defied danger. Her attitude was fine.

"What a fool that woman is!" said Veere suddenly to his party, or any one else who cared to hear it. "I must tell her. She's a stranger here, I dare say, and doesn't know how dangerous it is!"

Quickly he bridged the gulf that parted him from Betsey, whom he had recognised by the poise of her figure, sharply defined every now and again. It was unlikely that any one else had done so, or heard his excuse for joining her. The

senses of seeing and hearing possessed by these landsmen and landswomen were more or less in abeyance owing to the stress of wind and water.

Betsey, of course, did not hear Veere coming or notice him until he was close to her.

"Oh, mistress mine, where are you roaming? . . . Come away from here, it's dangerous."

She turned sharply, and veered towards him.

"Good girl! . . . That was only a blind. You're fairly sure-footed. Give me your hand for a minute. They can't see!"

She laid her palm in his. It was warm; she had held it in the pocket of her ulster.

"That's all. And now I'll go back to them."

"And may I stay where I am?"

"No, I'd rather you didn't, so near!"

As he departed, leaping gracefully from the Big Bear to the little one, he made a funnel of his hands, and bawled, for the benefit of the assistance, "Not safe!"

. . . . .

"He's happier for that hand-squeeze!" thought the woman he had left, scornfully. "He's gone back to them, with fresh strength gathered from me, to pull his iniquitous scheme through. And I, I should not have allowed him. It's as bad and immoral as getting up unemployed winter funds—only staves off the crux to another year!"

She could positively not bring herself to believe that Ernest Veere, loving her with all his heart, trusting her as no woman had ever been trusted before, with his business, with his hopes and aspirations, his secret failings and lapses into the commercialism from which he was attempting to rise, could actually and finally side-track her and his own future happiness by espousing the Lady Dobrée de Saye!

Impossible! She called him a cad, to his face and behind

his back, that is to say, in her own self-communings, but her basic belief in his practical integrity and intrinsic sense of decency was unshaken. He was the man of her heart, trammelled by the cloak of a superficial bounderism which her true gaze was able to pierce and eliminate from her conception of him.

His essential character must tell in the end, his natural nobility assert itself. So the wife of Altamont held on, day by day, a thwarted, lonely goddess, a statue of frozen, impotent love, disdaining to move hand or foot to deflect in any way advantageous to herself the vagarious course taken by her strayed votary. He did not leave her side altogether, he still sought his Egeria. Though her wisdom was set on one side, her suasions void, she could still heal and medicine the tired, wavering mind of the young man. For she knew men, above all she knew Ernest Veere, she had never made a serious miscalculation but once. In that vital moment, standing with him on the stair-head at Worksop House, she had gauged ill the world-forces given her, in ever so little, to control. She had missed her tip, lost her bearings, made a fool of herself, and him.

This was according to the code of the late Miss Altamont, whose pupil she was.

She had simply done wrong, been wicked and immoral, according to the Vicar of Angernoune, and she was coming to think that there was as much to be said for his view as for the other. He suited her. He was as modern as Miss Altamont, and he had taken her so gently along with him, that she was more affected by his subtle teachings than she would have cared to own.

It had come to this with her, that whatever her crime or her folly, she was willing to comply with its results—or punishment. She would bear, and forbear ; she would refrain from touching the pendulum of her own fate and her lover's any more.

Her part was again waiting! Apt corrective for a nature like Betsey's, to whom moral inaction always proved one of the worst circles of Hell. Waiting in Wimbledon—waiting in Angernoune, but always waiting!

She stood there on the gradually forsaken reef for some time. She saw, through the tail of her eye, the Castle party furl their wings and go home to tea. For them the play had been played. The eleventh wave had flung itself in all its force and majesty of endeavour at the land's eternal bulwark in vain; now the unhandsome rear-guard, the stunted warriors of the tide did not interest, the heart of the show was over. Yet Betsey stood there glued to the rock, pensive, paralysed with thought, her eyes fixed on the growling sea.

One mighty remainder gathered, surged up, and then laid itself out, a vast plateau of foamy water, gasping, panting on the flat of the shelving rock, as on a bed of pain. Betsey watched it go, as the sea sucked it back into its reserves, with a distinct feeling of regret that she was not borne away with it to the forgettable.

XXIX

Going past the old Castle mill on her way to the shore next day, Betsey met Ernest Veere and quietly adjusted her step to his, as she had adjusted so many another idiosyncrasy. He passed with her through the ancient postern gate that pierced the curtain wall, and thence, by some topsy-turvy steps, these two descended to the level of the sands.

Betsey thought with some temper that the owner, the host, the giver of this splendid holiday feast at Angernoune, seemed isolated and alone. His friends and guests avoided him, or at any rate did not seek his society. Was he conscious of it, she wondered? But her curiosity was not satisfied, Ernest was close.

"I suppose you knew yesterday," said he, alluding to the tidings of her husband's death; "I only saw it in the papers this morning. You won't want me to condole, I suppose?"

The young widow shivered. This was the sort of thing he said—this was the reason the fine-strung, fastidious people up there had left him to his own devices this morning—and every morning nearly—given him over to the handling of the woman who really loved him and understood him.

"Condole, yes, with Ada!" would have been her defiant reply a few months ago, but not now. She had done with surface bitterness; she who was sunk deep in a sea of despair, of which bitterness is but the foam and froth. Nowadays she would ill deserve Evangeline Simmons' oft-repeated praise of her tart speeches and cheap cynicism. She drifted now, unresisting, unresenting, with the grey flood that had taken her, which

she had once fought against, conspired against, and which had, through Love, overcome her. She was living in something very like the abeyance she had always so protested against, the cage from which she had once struggled so fiercely to be free. The door was open now, carelessly, languidly ajar, yet she stayed! Her life was a dreary *fait accompli* which even her convict husband's death could not affect one way or another. She did not desire to alter it. She philosophised a little, flirted a little, with the gentle vicar and his ungentle boys, was very good to Ada, and that was all. What a life!

Together she and Ernest descended into the field, half garden and half cricket-ground, which Sir Joris had made of the vast undisciplined masses of sand he had found lying up against the Castle rock of Angernoune at the outset of his occupancy. The fussy, utilitarian old gentleman, fuller of money than wit, had blasted the wind-blown sand of a century's drifting and silting, scraped its kindly softening mask from the serried rampart, contradicting and obscuring the natural droop of the cliff, and had laid the substance thus gained down here to form a wide, dull expanse for the benefit of Angernoune village, the prosecution of tennis and the arts of peace. So that the long curtain wall above, whence the faced stones had fallen away, been shot away, had weathered away, till in some places it showed nothing but coarse inside rubble, rose sheer out of the horny-looking basalt, suggesting savage scarped teeth from which the gums had been peeled.

The two stood and looked up at it, with rather mixed feelings. She was the romanticist, and he the practical engineer. They were, however, mysteriously one. Veere's intense loneliness dropped from him like a veil, and her sullen pessimism.

He gently took hold of her elbow and jogged it. She turned and flashed her eyes at him with something of the old look. Then they both laughed, as Adam and his faulty Eve may have done in that first wild moment when they had passed beyond the flaming swords that shut them off from the rigours

of Paradise. They were free for the time; the aching back and sweating brow would come later. . . .

"Take a walk with me," he begged. "A real walk!"

A touch of primordial huff impelled her to put him off. She had had so few opportunities of exercising femininity lately.

"Would it be safe?"

"Do you mean might it jeopardise my matrimonial plans? Oh, no, nothing can interfere with them, not even her present fancy for Lee-Brice. That's only, so far, a clumsy measure of flirtation, aimed at me. She may get caught, though. No, I don't think so, for she's a business woman, my little Dobrée."

"A woman after your own heart."

"One would fancy so," he said gloomily. "All I know is she means to have the place, and incidentally—me! The place, though, is the thing, the place that was once her own. Do you know that?"

"I know it was built by an Earl of Angernoune."

"William Rufus, to begin with. The Angernounes have royal blood in their veins. Well—I—or my like—took it from her in the Wars of the Roses. I've been mugging up some history lately, and arranging it in my mind from my point of view—the utilitarian. I find Dobrée's people were the Old and we were the New, then as now. Now we buy their estates, then we took 'em. I fought Dobrée—broke her—broke her power, and now that she is harmless I am willing to reinstate her, by marriage, the usual way. . . . Do you see those?" He pointed to the immense masses of casing of the wall that studded the Castle green.

"Those lumps of petrified plum pudding!"

"Yes, a conglomerate of stone and mud and Roman cement, that's what they really are. The old Saxon masons had an inkling of the secret, for the Romans left it behind them. But we cannot recover it. It resists even a fall like that, of six hundred feet or so. That portentous mass of embattled masonry *was* Angernoune—its strength. Well, I re-

duced it, flung it down with my modern artillery. I see myself here—I'll call myself young Edward of York, shall I ?—perched on that rising knoll over there, opposite the Lancastrian stronghold — I, with my modern ideas and my travelled minions, home from Italy, laughing at the antiquated defences of the old regime. They have persuaded me to adopt some of the novelties in offensive weapons—they cost a lot then. Old Margaret of Anjou's captain in here, Sir Ralph Gascoigne—I always think *she* was a kind of mediæval Victoria—felt pretty safe when he saw the Yorks mounting their cannon on the knoll, for he supposed them the rotten old tools he was accustomed to, fixed things, used only to frighten the horses and the men. He wasn't up to the great new gun 'Dysion,' that sent a ball slap through his lodging, and destroyed his confidence and battered the place down about his ears in no time ! That's where the ball went in—there, where Dobrée's new Liberty bedroom has been built ! He capitulated, poor dear, of course. They, the besiegers—I mean I—was able to eat my Christmas dinner in Angernoune. Moreover, Kymarays, Thomas of Lancaster's place, fell too, in the same week. An end of the old order. . . . Betsey, tell me, are you going to America now ? "

They had walked a good half-mile along the links, and now they sat side by side in a cleft of the sandhills, like a holiday couple. She was a vertical line, he a horizontal one, as usual.

" America ! " said she. " How did you get there from the great gun Dysion ? Oh, I see ! The Old and the New."

" Yes, that's about it. It reminded me of something you threw out a month or two ago." She stared. " Are you going to America ? "

" No, not now."

" Why not ? "

" Stupid ! "

She just touched his cheek with the tip of a long bit of bent grass. She was stiff with nerves, as she always was when the

hour struck for her to lead them on one of the little amorous attacks that she every now and then permitted herself. An agonised, desperate sortie, to be conducted with spirit, while the retreat must be masked and covered by such insouciance as she could muster. Again, as oft before, it was a failure, and she subsided into her usual soft inertia.

"Why am I stupid?" he had retorted, angrily, and she had averted her eyes while he continued: "You wanted to go—before—it was the desire of your heart, so you said, I remember distinctly. But you went with me instead because, to your disgust, you weren't a widow! Really, you women——!"

"In a fit of rage it was—yes!" She drew a harsh blade of grass through her teeth, and then again. . . .

"Well, be reasonable! Now that you are a widow, why has the desire passed? You could now do all you proposed then, and more!"

"I've done a good deal," she said, "all the same. "What I wanted most was to get out of the suburbs, and I am here."

"Yes, Angernoune's a rather different affair, isn't it? I'm glad you like it. But it isn't America."

"America was only to marry. I don't want to marry—now."

"No," said he seriously. "I can understand that. Indeed, I can't understand anybody wanting to who's once been through it, and had an experience such as you've had. You chose your mate wrong, my poor Betsey, in the first instance."

She was about to jump on him in Wilfrid's defence, but she loved Ernest too much. She said softly: "We all do. It's good for character. You'll be much nicer and far more understanding when you've made your little mistake too."

"Dash it all, Betsey, must you keep on rubbing it in like this! What's come to you? Continually throwing cold water—it gets on a fellow's nerves at last, especially when he has very serious doubts himself of the propriety of the step he is taking."

" Then why do you take it ? "

" There you are again ! "

" I'm sorry."

He half rose. . . . " Well, I don't pretend to understand women ! "

She looked up at him with her mouth awry. " It *would* be pretending if you said you did, dear."

" I leave such special knowledge to novelists like Lee-Brice, whose business it is."

" Are you jealous of him ? " she asked combatively.

" With you I am. Not with Dobrée. It's the wrong way round, of course. All of a piece with my exceedingly topsy-turvy courtship."

Betsey could not nor would not say anything. Sexual obstinacy possessed her merely.

" I wish I *were* jealous of her. It would argue better for our future happiness. The funny thing about Dobrée is that she doesn't seem a woman at all—to me. Lee-Brice appears to find her a highly problematic, feminine study. To me she's a pretty little dodo, soon to be extinct. I can't entertain the idea of her being a real woman, like you, for a single moment ! You are so feminine ; she's like a boy. I like women. It's pathetic, isn't it, that we should be about to be allied."

" It's not pathetic so much as wrong."

His sweet monitory smile reminded Betsey that she had fallen into preaching again. He continued : " But, strangely enough, to the chap who writes indecent novels, all about that sort of thing—novels positively weltering with sex, as Lady Maude says—she seems to appeal ! He's always talking of her —quite respectfully, you know. I couldn't find anything to take hold of or resent as the girl's fiancé, even if I wanted to. I don't want to—I like to hear her appreciated, poor little thing ! Good Lord, I wonder what's the matter with it all ! I can't get the hang of it. Can you ? "

He flung himself, face downwards, in the sand. Betsey

braced her backbone and sat up stiffly, looking out to sea, with the dull, resigned expression of one of the homeless on a bench in the Park, beside a possibly brutish sleeping partner. She had the hang of it right enough. Her hand scooped up the hard, cold grains of sand beside her, she drove them into her nails; she felt them going in—a slight counter-irritant. At last he sat up and pushed the neat dark hair, just greying slightly at the temples, back from his forehead;—

"Fact is, Betsey, these are not my sort. I'm only just one remove from a working-man—and I'm not ashamed of it."

"They all say that, some time," said she. "Keep it for the hustings. It's a platform platitude."

"Don't tease! I've been well educated, been abroad, know five languages, got good natural parts. Have you noticed, Betsey, what a flight there is of young fledglings like me growing up!"

"I've never seen anybody like you!"

"You flatter," he said, smiling. "Heaps of us. These modern conditions produce us naturally, and will, more and more of us. I know what we're like well enough. Men you'll never think, soon, of wondering whether they're gentlemen or no. It's immaterial. The breed's here, come to stay. The new pattern. They're just the good piece of mental machinery slipped into a fairly decent reach-me-down of a body. They come bouncing out of shops, out of schools, out of classes, anywhere they can hear and learn things. Then they go about their different businesses, they travel in this or that, guns, electricity, anything you like. They glide about and slide in and fit into all sorts of places, but they know no Greek or Latin, and they offer to "relieve" a lady of her cup, and they generally can't dance—like me. I'm awfully out of it o' nights here. We—I mean they—dressed up last night and danced. Tommy-rot, *I* think."

"But that's only because you *can't* dance! And I won't

admit you're just the same as the man who comes about the gas or the electricity ! " said she, wilfully misunderstanding him. " You'll tell me next you've worked in a mine."

" 'Strewth ! I have. We all have to begin from the beginning at Hinderland, if we want to make a job of it. I tell you I did my day's shift and so on, underground, like any one else, for a year on end. When I told Dobrée that she wouldn't believe me, poor little kid ! "

" Kid ! She's taller than you ! "

" Kid to me, all the same ! . . ." He groaned. " Oh, good Lord, how I wish this house party was over. I let myself in for it out of vanity, and I'm well paid out. It doesn't go the least bit in the world."

" Not in your idea. I dare say it's the usual thing in her set ! Different sets, different ideas."

" I have no set. I wish you wouldn't keep rubbing it in. But it really is a bad botch. It's not the right thing. She is far too young and selfish to be a good hostess, that is what's the matter, I suppose."

" She'll get on better in London."

" I sincerely hope so. If it's going to be anything like this when we are married, and she asks the members of the Cabinet to dinner, I don't know what I'm marrying her for ? And if these are her highly extolled friends——"

" They're the usual smart, dull London people ! "

" Yes, very smart—men without livers and women without stomachs—or hearts either. To see them going down to the beach o' mornings, flattened out in skin-tight dresses that peel off them like bananas, or paddling about villages in the afternoons, shrieking for the tea that isn't, and the yokels staring at them in their motor coats which make them look for all the world like hedgehogs, that a gipsy would bake until the skin stayed behind in the ashes ! They treat a mediæval castle as if it was a Surrey mansion, and they seem to have brought all the airs of Hindhead and the graces of

Haslemere with them. . . . This blessed afternoon we're all going to bore ourselves at a garden-party at Castle de Saye. The Duchess of Lax is Dobrée's aunt—gives me three fingers and wishes I wasn't going to enter her family. The Ladies Ninian, Dobrée's cousins, show the elastic of their hats and curl up their noses when they hear of Suffragettes ! "

" Good as gold, eh ? "

" It is that sort of people keeps the old feudal fetish going, which Lady Maude and her like are trying to pull down. I can see that."

" Possibly. Well . . . Ernest . . . don't be shocked, but I must tell you that Lady Dobrée's maid has invited Ada and Billy and me to come round when you are gone and be shown the Dwelling House. I said I would. My position here is already so irregular that a few chips off it won't matter. We shall dress in our best, you know, to show the solemnity of the occasion, and put on our hats and our gloves to cross the courtyard ! "

" And have tea in the servants' hall. You, my Betsey ? I don't quite like that."

" Frankly, I don't think there is so much to choose between the two sets. We call all the maids by their mistresses' names, and they behave much better than their namesakes, for they daren't degrade their titles ! You've taste possibly, but we've morals. And manners. We don't stick acid-drops in the men's beds, and throw our bread about, and comb men's hair with table forks, and try to put dormice into the teapot——"

" Oh, you heard about that, did you ? That was Dobrée's quiet fun. She's always teasing little Vallance. He's a twentieth cousin. They're all related all over the place. . . . Well, good-bye ; I dare say you'll have a better time than I shall. Old Brookie—see that you get old Brookie—is quite a character."

XXX

The courtyard for half an hour before three o'clock that day was a pandemonium. Yelping dogs, chattering women, snorting, unruly motors chafing to be gone! By a quarter-past three it was clear and empty, and the Keep, as usual, frowned over the absurd level grass plot with its eight croquet hoops and the sweep of carefully tended yellow gravel that stretched between the two buildings.

Betsey, and Ada with the little Wilfrid—the two latter as deeply in mourning as they dared to be—crossed it, and holding the child up, helped him to ring the electric bell of the Dwelling House, a privilege coveted long and, by the circumstances of the case, of unfrequent attainment. Mr. Brooks opened the door, and his priest-like countenance, wreathed with unaccustomed smiles, welcomed the Lady of the Keep and her pale, unconsidered shadow. They were led ceremoniously into the housekeeper's room, where Miss Parker received them. The housekeeper, a busy woman, was in and out, but Brooks, an amateur of female beauty, sat tight, and tried to entertain Betsey.

"Did you happen to see to-day's paper, Mrs. Adamson?" he asked.

"No. Why?"

"Only our Mr. Veere's case is coming on at last."

"And he'll get it, of course," said she.

"Oh, certainly, there's not a shadow of doubt. Waste of money on their part. Of course, *we* don't have to think of that! Still, I don't like Mr. Veere to be troubled. Not that

there's anything in the young man's claim. A regular adventurer, this Ernest Louis seems to be. I knew the lady—the one that was his mother! Of course, she was his mother right enough—but we all know what Sir Joris was, bless him!"

"Don't you go blaming Sir Joris, Mr. Brooks," put in the housekeeper. "He was the nicest man I ever knew."

"He could be that and all the rest too," began Mr. Brooks and stopped. "But there are ladies present—— !"

"Oh, go on, Mr. Brooks, do! We're all married women here except me," broke in Miss Parker. "And I'm Lady Dobrée's maid. In Bohemia—Upper Bohemia, she calls it——"

"What's that? Sounds like a street," said Mrs. Cox.

"Name for do as you please, go as you please and when you please—and wear an old coat," said Miss Parker. "And but that Chaytor's away, she could tell you things——"

"We won't speak ill of the absent," said Mr. Brooks. Chaytor was Lady Maude's maid, and she stood for her and her vices, and went by her name, officially. She was in bed now with a bad cough caught at her last visit to a cold house where low dress in the servants' hall was unfortunately *de rigueur*. Parker, with sturdy kitchen morality, took up the cudgels for the absent.

"Lady Maude's not quite particular enough, but she's got a kind heart all the same. She stayed a day longer at Pillingham just to give Chaytor a chance of getting over her cold. She always lets Chaytor come and attend to her all ready dressed for supper, so long as the girl sticks a golf cape over her evening frock. Pillingham's a mortal cold house, and so stiff. This house is colder, but more laissy ally. How do you find it in the Keep for heating apparatus, Mrs. Cox?"

"Very cold," said Ada. "But it suits my son, and that's all I think of now since my poor husband's death. I don't wear crape, for the sea-air stickys it so, but——"

Betsey quickly asked Miss Parker to show them over the

Dwelling House. That lady acceded joyfully, and took all the rooms, one by one, till they came to the only one that interested Betsey—Lady Dobrée's.

It was as vast, as spacious as a drawing-room, with light modern Louis Quinze furniture dotted about on a fair rose-strewn Aubusson carpet. On little lace-covered tables were spread poor Dobrée's meagre effects. Her cotton dressing-jacket, trimmed with cheap lace, was flung on a silk table-cover, edged with real Valenciennes. Her worn bedroom slippers made an ugly blot on the pink rug. Yes, she wanted money badly!

"It's the best room. Mr. Veere wanted her to have it. Lord and Lady Blessington haven't one half so good. It's the one him and her'll occupy one day, I suppose!"

Betsey quivered. Then, daringly, she said: "You don't seem very keen on it, Miss Parker?"

"No, he's not her sort, really, not the sort she's been used to. It's just a fancy of hers, that's what this is. Girls are like that. They don't think. He's a nobody, of course, wants her title, and if he loses his money he'll be nothing at all. I'd rather see her married to the writing gentleman—he's some family, I'll be bound, for all he writes for a living! I'm never deceived. I see so many people. He's with her a good deal, and Mr. Veere either don't know—or he don't care! . . . He's teaching my lady to write a novel, too. She sits up here half the night scribbling—I have to take the ink away before I can get her to bed—and then what she's done she shows him in the day. She's mad on novel-writing just now."

"How silly!" said Betsey, whose heart leapt. She sneaked up to a photograph of Ernest propped up against a row of Lee-Brice's books. The careless juxtaposition struck her. She liked it, as she liked everything that seemed to point to an understanding between these two in which her own lover did not share. Ernest was being left out in the cold. Every one conspired to put him back in his proper place beside her. He

deserved it for aspiring, if it *was* aspiring? Lady Dobrée's world and his were different, hers was not necessarily better. Hers represented a mediæval tag, a stupid feudal remnant clinging to the ancient fetish that was their reason of existence. Let them draw closer and expire within their borders, instead of feebly seeking to revive what was moribund by these occasional infusions of clever common blood!

She loved every drop of it. She bent forward when no one was looking and kissed the photograph of Ernest. It lurched and fell down behind the chest of drawers.

"Oh, silly, see what I've done!" she cried, and stooping low, retrieved it.

XXXI

The Dwelling House party came home late, having crossed the Carter Fell, run out of petrol at Edlingham, and burst a tyre at Rothbury. Because they were all worn out, they elected to dance after dinner. Little Lord Vallance, who had driven the second car, volunteered to play for them as long as he could sit on a music stool.

Ernest Veere wished heartily they would not choose this form of exercise, for though he was graceful and limber, he could not dance. He felt all the sulkiness of the male wall plant, though he did not allow his vexation to be obvious. Standing lonely in a corner of the big hall at the end of the drawing-room that served as a ballroom for these absurd people, who seemed to be enjoying themselves hugely, he, the host, felt like the meanest, uncounted guest in a London crush, and resented it.

Idly he visited each one of the square *encoignures*, cut in the thickness of the wall, with a single window that looked sheer down six hundred feet of Castle rock. Green silk curtains shut off, if need were, all these little " sitting-out " places. The hall had been designed for dancing. Royalty should have been entertained there, if Sir Joris had not been cut off untimely by Betsey's husband.

Veere thought of this—he was in the mood for gloomy antithesis. He drew the curtain of one of the spaces and, shutting himself off from the gyrating couples, opened the window and looked out into the mild August night. Far below he saw the twinkling lights of Angernoune. In the

middle of the plot of trees that formed the village green he noticed a focus of gleaming merriment. The fair had come, and the horses had been set up and were going round and round—a wheel of glittering spokes. The discordant notes of the hurdy-gurdy, that turned music and horses both, came to his ears faintly, with its all too familiar tang.

"*Oh, my little dar-ling, I love you!*" The notes of the three last words came strongly staccatoed. He pictured it. Pairs of village love-birds were even now going round and round on the nicely balanced, painted wooden horses, two and two, an ever renewed procession. Then the end of the tune would be ground out and giddiness at the dismounting would take them, and She would sway and swirl dizzily into His arms, with passionate "Ow's" and "Ha's." The same thing was going on inside, at his back. He knew if he looked round he would see Lady Maude and Blessington, apologising to each other for the time it was since they had last danced. There would be Lady Blessington and the man she had brought, that no one knew anything about, except that he amused her and that Lord Blessington tolerated him. There would be Lady Dobrée with Lee-Brice, who danced in the Viennese fashion, which Veere disliked so much, for it was excessive. The male dancer made a point of at once taking his partner off her feet, her useless feet, that he seldom allowed her so much as to touch the ground with. What need? She lay, slightly tilted forward, on his breast, as he bore her safely, irresponsibly, through the mêlée. Warm-blooded women—or their husbands for them—pretended that they dared not trust themselves with him; he contended that his dancer and he were one, and hardly need she lift her head from its pose on his shoulder. Had she done so, indeed, her emotions, so easily raised, would have received the cold douche of his unmoved face and wary eyes, gauging distances, plumbing horizons, steering for all he was worth, and no sharer of the divine frenzy he was inculcating in his helpless partner.

"After all, it's only an exercise!" was Veere's short-sighted comment on the art, as he turned back to night thoughts and the open window. He looked out and down again. A wide macadamised track led in a sweeping, gradual curve down, down from the south gate and the drawbridge to the village. . . . A small, compact figure on a bicycle was flying down the slope. He recognised it.

Betsey! The new-made widow. The tomboy. She was hardy and capable as he knew, but still he didn't quite like her taking that steep curve so carelessly! It was in vain to hope to prevent her by calling out, but he did so.

"What are you shouting at?" The harsh voice of Lady Dobrée made him turn round sharply. She had come up behind him and drawn back the curtains of his shelter. "Brr! The window's open. But I don't mind. I rather like feeling the wind on my neck!"

He turned, quite savagely, and glared at this famous neck that enjoyed the cold air so keenly. The perfunctory display of naked flesh outraged the latent claustral prejudices he shared with most men. Perhaps it was because he had never seen Betsey's neck bare below her collar-bone? . . . Perhaps it was the insensate, Jura-like tone of the young girl's skin that suggested merely a lifeless chastity, an arrogant, unearned increment of purity that annoyed him? Some women's appeal to the senses of men is conscious, but the direction of her dressmaker's scissors alone regulated the surrender of personality implied in the cut of Lady Dobrée's gown.

And it was right it should be so. What was he thinking of? She was only a girl. His soul, in the tide of cruel sexual criticism, paused and pitied her—and himself too. He was to make her a woman. With a groan he turned to the window again and closed the casement with savage vigour, lest he were tempted to throw himself down.

Where had Betsey gone at this hour, speeding, like Britomart, under her panoply of rough serge, buttoned to the chin,

and little tight, helmet-like cap that took all her hair in? She made so little of her hair here, good Betsey, for prudence' sake, only letting it out of prison sometimes, when far out on the rocks, or in Kymarays Bay, and then it was not Ernest Veere, but Lee-Brice who was with her.

Why not? She was free. She liked men. She liked life. She was probably gone down to see one of its phases now at the fair, in the company of the four vicarage boys, who all adored her. So did their father. He was a widower. She saw a good deal of him. She might marry him—she was quite good and pure. The vicar was a freethinker, and could easily get over the fact of her being the widow of a murderer, if she on the other hand could make up her mind to endure his Jaeger shirts and woollen knitted stockings and nut diet.

Not she! He was not afraid of her doing that. . . .

"Are you alone?"

It was Dobrée, again, trying to be arch. She drew the curtain back. The ballroom was deserted. They had all gone to comfort Lord Vallance, who for sheer fatigue of having driven them all day, had now, as he had threatened, fallen off the music stool, and declined to play any more without a whisky and soda. . . . The curtain flapped-to behind her. Veere closed the window officiously. Though breathless, the girl did not look hot. Lady Dobrée was proud of that peculiarity, she hated girls that got red after dancing. Veere, on the other hand, liked them to do so, because it was natural.

They were alone. He could have flung his arms round her and kissed her now, ardently, passionately, with perfect social impunity. He might even pretend that she was not his fiancée, if he cared to add a forbidden zest. He saw the little romance-seeking look in her eyes, and realised that at the moment she desperately longed for the power to force and impel him to such harmless rape.

The moment passed. She said pettishly:

"Why can't you dance? It is such fun!"

" It's about the only thing I can't do," he retorted, nettled. " It's just that I haven't had time to learn. I'm a worker, you see."

" Mr. Lee-Brice can dance, and write books as well."

" Yes, and nice books they are, with a dissected motive on every page, books that take a pride in prowling about in people's innards, like the hand of the executioner in the old days. One criminal bounced up and hit the man who was doing it on the head ! "

" How horrible ! You haven't much poetry in you, Ernest, to talk about ' innards ' in a ballroom ! "

" You and I have no use for poetry, have we ? And yet——" He pointed to the view below, to the little circle of twinkling lights, set in their solemn nest of dark green. " That seems to me poetical, somehow."

"A lot of cads going round and round on wooden horses ? " Lady Dobrée said doubtfully. She could not know that Ernest Veere's excursion into poetical sentiment was accentuated by the little fact that he had just seen his love speeding down to join in this village *Kermesse*. But she valued Ernest at this moment to an unusual extent ; the touch of unaccustomed wistfulness about the hard-headed business man was attractive, and she murmured, much as a housewife who volunteers to order in some particular comestible fancied by her lord and master :

" I could be poetical, too, if I liked ! "

" Not you. It is hardly in your line."

" Ernest, am I so hard ? I don't believe I am, really. It is that I am unawakened." She stopped and savoured the word.

" Has Lee-Brice been telling you so ? " he said in dreamy annoyance.

" He said I was a sort of Sleeping Beauty ! " . . . She turned away. " Now you will think I am conceited for telling you that ! "

"No, I don't." He took her hand. "My dear child, you're pretty enough, goodness knows. You know I think so."

She looked up gratefully at him and perforce he kissed her. "Wake! The woman who wants to get her full share of kisses nowadays must be jolly wideawake, and not afraid of pricking her fingers on the rose-bush of life either."

"How pretty! The rose-bush of life! Ernest!" Again there was the rough note in the voice. "Ernest! I believe if you were to kiss me, once—as you probably kiss some other woman——?"

"On my honour, I do not have anything to do with any other woman—in the way you mean."

"I believe you. How stupid of you!"

It was a wrong note. He became bitter again.

"Lady Maude taught you to say things like that."

"No, indeed. I think for myself. I'm waking—and not through you, dear. . . . There, now you hate me!"

"My poor Dobrée!" He took her hand, but they were no longer alone. The others were beginning to come back into the ballroom; the pianist had been fortified and replaced on his seat. "I can't kiss you now—here—can I?"

"Come into the morning-room, then. There's no one there!"

He was not so much touched, as shocked by this sexual gaucherie.

"And do you mean to prove me there, once for all—to test the strength of my feeling for you? . . . No, it can't be like that! . . ." He spoke hastily, eagerly, as if it had to be said. . . . "Dobrée, what's to be done? Are we two to marry?"

She flung away from him, out of the window-place, and beckoned to Lee-Brice. On his arm, clinging affectedly, she passed out of the dance, and he saw the pair go into the empty morning-room.

"Sweet innocent! She is trying to make me jealous,"

Veere thought. Sad and depressed beyond measure as he was, he laughed. "It's no good. I am *not* jealous! Follow them—not I!"

He issued into the circle of light and made himself agreeable to a cousin of Lady Dobrée's.

XXXII

The young girl flung herself into an arm-chair. Mr. Lee-Brice sat down at a respectful distance and crossed his long legs. His stateliness, his steely greyness, his somewhat pompous earnestness, would have made him a suggestive model for Don Quixote or Sir Galahad. He was not heated with his previous exertions in the ballroom. He looked distinguished, but the subscribers to Wellington's, their imaginations heated by a perusal of what they would have called some "sultry" works of his, would have been somewhat disagreeably disappointed, and would have agreed that in spite of these titles to a fame of dis-esteem, he did not look the man and the brute they were prone to fancy him. He laid the crush hat, with which he never neglected to go armed, across his knee, and waited patiently until the storm-tossed child of rank should unbosom herself. She looked at him after a while inquiringly, and conventionally attempted to tear a lace handkerchief into fragments. . . .

"I suppose you find me a fairly good study, Mr. Lee-Brice?" she said at last, pettishly.

"A good deal more than that."

"Well, if it's any good to you, I don't mind sitting here and giving you tips. . . . It must be quite in your line. . . . A tortured woman's heart! Perhaps, though, you don't believe I have got a heart? Or that I'm a woman at all?"

He put up his pince-nez. The proud Lady Dobrée endured his probing glance. She had tears in her eyes.

" No, I see that you are really suffering—as women alone can suffer," he said. "There can be no mistake about it. You have got quite beyond controlling the amount of emotion that can be contained in the ordinary human vessel without spilling. It's an unfair strain. Could one—could I palliate it in any way? I am here . . ."

" Yes, you are so splendid—you understand."

" Trained to it, you see? "

" I know. That is why I should so like to tell you how I feel, but it is very difficult. I don't know how——" She sat up as if she were riding, and flung her handkerchief in a ball on to the table. " One thing I can tell you—being engaged is very poor fun! And it ought to be the happiest time of one's life! "

" Oh, no, it oughtn't. It's a preparation for the encounter, merely, a prolonged formal salute, such as fencers use before they cross swords and start. The fun comes after, and the tears too."

She smiled, reached out for the sopped handkerchief, and lay back stiffly in her chair.

" I do like you to talk to me cynically as if I really were grown up, as I am. But no one else seems to realise it. There seems to be a conspiracy here to keep me a child, and Ernest Veere, that I'm supposed to be going to marry, is the worst. He treats me as if I was a flapper—he snubs me! After all, one is the principal person for the moment, or ought to be—to him, at all events; and he, he doesn't give himself the least trouble in the world to get to understand one or to appreciate the character of the woman he's going to spend his life with. Oh, it's all wrong! . . . I'm all wrong, I suppose? . . . I look into myself, and . . . "

She rose abruptly, walked across the room, and drawing a *brise-bise* curtain so harshly that it grated on its rings, stared out into the courtyard.

Mr. Lee-Brice was undecided whether to follow her at once,

or at all! She was moved, as he could see. He was rather sorry to see this young girl aping the airs and introspectiveness of a woman of mature years; but he realised with an artist's pleasure that the pose was for his benefit, and saw plainly enough what it might lead to if he wished it, and if he should consider that his career demanded it.

Apart from his own inchoate plans, it was interesting to watch Race struggling with its intrinsic dislike for Trade and trade methods, the Traditional detesting the Irresponsible, the Old the New, as exemplified in the supple person of Ernest Veere. And how curious it was that she should not realise that, in taking himself as her mentor and his counsels as her rule in life, she was merely appealing to the same business instinct in another form. The great shipowner: the popular novelist—boilers: literature, it was all one and the same. The novelist, indeed, was a child of his age, a man who had struggled, and was under no misapprehensions as to the purely commercial nature of his own life-work. Whether Lady Dobrée de Saye married Ernest Veere or himself, she and her title would come to be exploited just the same. The easy ornate pessimism bred of low aims and cultivated in newspaper offices; the cynical attitude inculcated by *The Sweep* and kindred publications and good-humouredly satirised as a rule during the London season in two or three plays at once, was his. The satire was vain, without prejudice, a man must live—and not in a garret!

The girl's long back was persistently turned towards him. His fancy began to stray into the future. Perhaps, when they were married, the Lady Dobrée Lee-Brice would be heard at dinner-tables, like other commercial wives, who jibbed at the means, but enjoyed all the emoluments of the position, indignantly repudiating all acquaintance with her husband's books; with affected horror disowning the "stuff" that dressed her and sent her into the world as an advertisement. Such things had happened. . . .

He was roused from his somewhat premature reflections by a murmured request from the figure at the window.

"Mr. Lee-Brice, do come here."

He joined her, and she mysteriously pointed out to him Ernest Veere striding across the lawn towards the little wicket which led by a short cut to the principal gate of the Castle.

"Where's he off to, without a hat?" she asked breathlessly.

"To the fair, I should think, to take a turn on the merry-go-round," the author said reassuringly, turning away from the window and inviting Lady Dobrée to do the same and resume the conversation. "One only hopes he won't be thrown. . . . What are you ringing for? Let me?"

"You'll soon see!" she said, a little hectic red spot growing on her cheek, very obvious as Brooks appeared.

"Tell my maid to come here with my wrap, the dark one."

"What are you going to do?" said the author, his dark eyes glowing with some of the spirit of adventure.

"We're going down to the fair to see that Ernest doesn't fall off. You'll escort me, won't you?"

"To the end of the world, and Angernoune village green. . . . It is mild enough," he murmured to himself. Then aloud, "Hadn't we better take Lady Maude?"

"If you like. But you'll make the expedition disreputable at once if you do. Besides, she's in at bridge by now. She'd hate to be commandeered to chaperone."

Lady Dobrée considered the matter settled. She was unused to being contradicted. Her maid brought the wrap, and Lee-Brice, wearing a soft hat and with his Spanish hidalgo's cloak thrown over his shoulder, escorted this Elvira to track out her wayward Don Juan.

. . . . .

The cocoanut shies, the fat lady, the shooting-galleries had taken their horses out and now nestled comfortably under the canopy of tall trees which made of the three-cornered village green as seen from the Castle a thick, impenetrable mat of foliage. Lee-Brice enjoyed to the full the peculiar pleasure which the under-lighting of swart green leaves always gave him. To Lady Dobrée, standing at his side, sturdily planted on white satin slippers, while the hem of her close-fitting white frock, which she held tightly and relentlessly round her, bisected the vertical line of her ankles, this Teniers-like scene, with its smug boors and flaring lights and dark darknesses, represented but a less well-managed *Kermesse* than she had often seen on the operatic stage. She was, moreover, deeply intent on singling out the man she had come to look for. Now and then she stamped her feet with a feverish, ill-disguised impatience, and the thin dried leaves crackled beneath her tread. Lee-Brice quite realised her nervous state, but he was not afraid of an anti-social outburst such as he might have expected from the less well-regulated Betsey. He knew that Lady Dobrée had self-control at will and a certain stagnant power of repose, and could bide her time with anybody.

But it was nearly twelve o'clock. He began to get anxious to take this enterprising lamb back to her magnificent fold. They had as yet seen no sign of Veere or Betsey. They had no inkling of the right place to look for her. Suddenly, however, their wandering gaze fixed itself on the merry-go-round and its caparisoned wooden steeds, and then they were both aware of a spirited figure in a short skirt and piquant cap, from which masses of gold hair flew abroad, riding on a red horse with blue trappings.

"There she is!" Lady Dobrée exclaimed, "on the merry-go-round, actually! What a cad!"

"Hardly that. Only, popular prices, as you might say," corrected Lee-Brice, adjusting his pince-nez. He admired Betsey in her degree, and he had had several long talks with

her. He gazed at her next time she came round and then said, deliberately :

" She looks very fine. Like a Covent Garden Valkyrie, and better. All that golden hair escaping—flying in the wind——"

" Gold hair has it, then ! " she replied languidly. " There's a certain kind of man, I believe, who goes down like a nine-pin before gold hair."

" Not I. It's always bound to be dyed after thirty."

" And is she thirty ? Well, I don't know about you, of course, but all Ernest's flirtations have to have it, it seems. Didn't that Mrs. Altamont ? I heard so. It was supposed to shine through her veil, and light up the whole dingy court at the trial, so *The Sweep* said. Oh dear me, how jealous I was of her—once ! "

" Not really ? " said the man at her side. " Well, like to like ! I'll wager you anything that she will feel sick presently, and come off, and Ernest will find her. Shall we go ? "

She signified her assent, lifted her skirts still higher over her thin legs, regardless of grinning yokels' glances, and moved away. As they reached the outer fringe of the crowd they met Ernest Veere, rushing towards them, wild-eyed, from his long walk on the links.

Lady Dobrée nodded at him. Unruffled, she waved her hand in the direction of the merry-go-round, which had just started again to its appropriate music.

" You'll find your friend, Mrs. Adamson—isn't that her name ?—in there," she said. " Good night. I'm getting cold."

She did not take the arm of Mr. Lee-Brice, but walked along by his side in silence. He realised that an important shift of her mental kaleidoscope had taken, or was taking place, and forbore to distract her thoughts that were probably turning conveniently in his direction. Ernest Veere had done for himself this evening.

Lady Dobrée presently held up a white satin-shod foot, to

which dull dead leaves adhered. " Parker will blow me up for spoiling my shoes," she remarked.

" Shall I carry you ? "

" No," she answered. She turned to him, as they began to mount the incline by the zigzag paths that dissimulated it a little, and spoke to him, using some of the roughest cadences of which her voice was capable.

" Mr. Lee-Brice, you saw that woman ? What has she got that I haven't, besides a lot of hair ? "

" Spots of commonness, anyway."

" Yes, but . . . charm seems to neutralise even commonness—it will neutralise anything, it seems. Why was I sent into the world without it ! "

" My dear Lady Dobrée ! "

" Lady Dobrée—yes—but with nothing else to recommend her ! "

" A fine—a very fine—character ! I mean it."

" I believe you do. But——" She looked away, she was oppressed by shyness, yet lured by the desire to disburden herself of confidences. " I'd adore any one who could persuade me that I had one little tiny iota of the other thing. It's something small and wonderful, like radium—a tiny speck of it can modify a whole continent. It's the one bit that'll be left when the planets burn up, and it's the only thing that manages to survive a woman's beauty, and everything else."

He took her hand and held it deliberately. The moment had come.

Lady Dobrée stopped on the cinder path and looked down on their linked palms dispassionately. She seemed to herself to speak with an effort, with a voice other than her own, but it only sounded rougher than ever.

" Are you trying to show me that I've got enough radioactivity about me to make you want to squeeze my hand ? "

. . . . .

Two vanities will never make a passion. Yet the young girl was soothed, consoled, and uplifted even. She had got what she wanted out of life. So had he.

Mr. Lee-Brice gently dropped the little complaisant hand he was holding when, a few minutes later, they both stood at the gate of Angernoune, and summoned the sleepy porter to let them in. It did not occur to Lady Dobrée to behave as if there were any understanding between herself and the author. When in the solemn courtyard, that slept under the moonlight, they came upon Lady Maude; she bluntly told that lady where she had been, and rallied her and her male companion in a voice from which she made no effort to remove the traces of emotion.

"Lord Vallance asked me to come out and catch cold with him!" Lady Maude explained. "The caprices of a nice boy are law to me, as you know——"

"So you arranged a dreamy scarf over your head and came. Suppose you take my man, and I'll have yours."

"All right! You've been crying, Dobrée?"

"Yes. Now, scatter!" She waved her hand and took Lord Vallance's arm as if it was a hedge stake, and led him aside.

"Do you know," said Lady Maude to the author as they also strolled away together, "that I accepted this invitation to Angernoune solely on your account. I thought we would have such nice long indecent talks together, and instead of that, you spend your time riding on roundabouts at village fairs with Ernest Veere's sweetheart!"

"Ah, but," he said gravely, watching the effect of his words on the Lady Maude, "it was Ernest Veere's other sweetheart who rode. Not mine!"

"Are you going to marry her?" the lady asked, calmly.

"Do you object? The Lady Dobrée is merely going to exchange one form of *mésalliance* for another."

She woundingly accepted his statement. "No. Poor

Dobrée was bound to do something of the kind. She's not had much chance. She's been forced to accept my valuable chaperonage—and you know what I am. I've had to let her into the society of people I despise, *nouveaux riches*, and so on, people I can get hold of, and who value her title just for what it gives them, and exploit her comparative poverty. Don't I know—but what can I do?"

"Yes," he said pensively, refusing to continue the conversation on this pessimistic note. "Rank is, or ought to be, primitive and simple, because there is no struggle for existence to breed complexity. Common people complicate life because it's a fight to them. She doesn't know how to fight any more than she knows how to darn stockings."

"Well, old Ernest would have saved her from that."

He laughed. "I think I can guarantee my wife immunity from that degrading form of servitude too. She will be a smart woman, never fear. Her fall from grace will secure her that. A duchess may be dowdy—Lady Dobrée Lee-Brice must dress the part."

"Oh, she'll manage," Lady Maude burst out. "She can say the most *risqué* things sometimes, and her dresses are, somehow, always cut lower and held up higher than any one else's!"

"The indelicacy of extreme innocence! Shall I tell you what flower she reminds me of? A little early crocus, sturdy, smooth-skinned, straight out of the ground, without guile or subterfuge, or moral trimmings of any kind—nearly curveless, except for a little bit of modest closing in at the top——"

"I'm what is known as a good sort," said Lady Maude, "and I can talk about another woman for half an hour good—but no more! Let us turn in."

XXXIII

Ernest Veere, his whole mind dazed and stupid with unusual introspection, his outside plastered over with his customary slickness and calm, made his way into the thick of the throng, until he stood side by side with the moving circle of the merry-go-round. He caught sight of the vicarage boys—and then of their cherished companion, Mrs. Altamont. She was actually mounted on a horse—riding abreast with one great grey-flannelled hobbledehoy who punctuated, with all sorts of vocal encouragements in a young voice pitched at breaking-point, their wild but restricted progress. Betsey's horse was on the outside.

"Betsey!" said Veere, as she passed. Even at that distance he saw that she looked distracted. Sad unto tears, with her golden hair coming down in floods under her cap, and riding a patient roan horse with blue and crimson trappings, she did not hear him as she pursued her circular course and curved rapidly away from him.

Next time she came round he was determined to make her hear, even at the risk of causing her to fall off with emotion.

"Betsey!" he said again, as she passed.

Her glance fell on him. It was full of reproach. He saw the shell-like whites of her eyes flash as she looked over her shoulder.

"Come and have a ride?" she shouted, her face suddenly instinct with tragic animation.

A great guffaw proceeded from the vicarage boy, too simple

to notice that Mr. Ernest Veere had called his pretty companion by her Christian name!

She passed again; Veere felt as if a part of him was borne in the remorseless curve along with this queer undisciplined piece of feminine flesh and blood, who did not belong to him but who alone had the power to make him feel angry. She had chosen such a fallacious escort for what could have been taken as a merely fashionable breaking-out of good spirits if skilfully managed! But these great rough boys, with harsh voices cracking all over the place! Her want of taste revolted him.

The wheel stopped. He found Betsey at his side, submissively tucking her hair out of sight. He said sourly:

"Don't trouble to hide it. . . . It's in character. That is, if you have any left!"

"Do mind your own business, Ernest!" She turned away, sticking in the last hairpin. Then she came back and touched him on the arm.

"I never did have any," she remarked appealingly. "You've always thought I did very well without it. I don't belong to the ranks of the chaperoned. How could I, the wife of Altamont?"

"Still, you might find a smarter escort!"

"To sit crying beside——? No, I prefer the vicarage boys; they are young and unsophisticated, they notice nothing."

"What should there be to notice? There oughtn't to be. But you've no dignity!"

"No," she said sadly. "Not now. Something—ladylike—in me has snapped. I've lost hold of myself. What matter, especially to you? And I can't help thinking that I manage to keep myself fairly respectable. At least, I'm as proper as your Lady Dobrée, who's been down here with Mr. Lee-Brice, in draggled white satin, and her neck bare for every man to stare at!"

"She dresses every evening, you see. And please don't abuse her to me! You lose ground."

"Well, I don't care to gain any," said she, gloomily. "How should I? The die is cast—your die—and yet you're scolding me as if I was your wife—as if we were Darby and Joan! . . . I'm having a fairly good time, in spite of my sorrows and so on, and I don't see why you, who are nothing to me, by your own choice, should come here and prate about dignity and make me self-conscious. It's no good! . . . You see, I'm not Mrs. Ernest Veere, and never shall be, so why shouldn't I ride twenty hobby-horses if I like? I'm Mrs. Adamson—common, second-rate Mrs. Adamson—who shows the Castle for sixpence to you and your real true friends, that understand you and love you, and think you're a right good sort, if a little bounderish! . . ."

She was crying. The sight moved him and took the sting out of her words. She continued, pushing him away and choking.

"Let me go. . . . I wish I was as perfectly indifferent to you as I try to batter myself into being; but you know I'm not, and I know you're not, and it's been hell. . . . Let me go, Ernest!—dear Ernest! It's a pity we understand each other so well, isn't it?"

He caught her hand and gripped it.

"You demon! And all you say is true . . . Betsey! dear Betsey!"

'Good-bye, Ernest. Let me go . . . please . . . I can't stand it. . . . I love you!"

She was gone, swallowed up in the crowd, her last whisper only half heard, half believed. . . .

. . . . .

"What is it? You sent for me?"

Lady Dobrée de Saye, very red, in a white kimono, stood

at the door of her room that night, and confronted Ernest Veere. She held out a handkerchief.

"What's the matter?" He looked at it. "Some one had hemorrhage?"

"No. I bit my lip, and I happened to have it in my hand. But it isn't mine." She held out a corner of it. Her face was crimson, but she was fairly calm.

"Well, you are a most original woman!" He turned away.

"Tcha! Read the name."

"E. Altamont," he read out crossly.

"I found it in my room behind a chest of drawers. Parker thinks it must belong to a friend of hers whom she had in here to tea. Only Parker says her friend's name was Adamson."

"Mrs. Adamson in the Keep?"

"Mrs. Altamont in the Keep."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Altamont, or Adamson, it appears to be hers. Give it back to her."

"I will."

"Very well, do so in the morning. Go to bed now, quietly. Good night. I suppose I mustn't kiss you before Parker?"

"That's just why you must," said she, capriciously.

The embrace was given and received. "May I really go and see her to-morrow?" she whispered.

"As you like."

"Shall you go across to-night and warn her?"

"No, I shall go straight to bed. You can watch me go if you like. I'm sick of it all, and I think I'll just leave it to Betsey to straighten it out."

"Betsey?"

"Yes, Betsey, that's her name. It's the golden-haired one. Don't make a mistake and claw Mrs. Cox's eyes out. Good night. You won't see me in the morning."

"Why not?"

"I'm off to town, to watch my case. First day of the trial to-morrow."

"Oh, poor Ernest——"

"Keep your pity," said he, crossly, turning and seeking his own room.

"Most original engaged couple I ever saw!" thought Lady Maude Erskine-Robertson, who, in a gorgeous flowered French *peignoir* that invited more instant recognition, watched the colloquy from her open bedroom door three or four steps up from Lady Dobrée's. Miss Parker did not abandon her post of observation. Three scared women's faces watched Veere as he flung away.

XXXIV

The beach at Angernoune was dotted in the summer months with bathing tents and cosy corners, but there was no pier, no bathing machines as yet. It ranked so far only as an amateur watering-place. Very little shipping came within eye-range except the Scotch steamers that coasted by on their way from London to Leith. There were lively quicksands, crabs that bit and jelly-fish that stung, and other obstructions that are not met with at Margate.

Still, Evangeline Simmons, on the look out for a seaside resort wherein to spend a month with her friend Mrs. Wormeley, had nosed it out. Evangeline loved the picturesque and the romantic, and Angernoune Castle, as every one knew, belonged to Ernest Veere, Betsey Altamont's friend. That added a zest to the Wimbledonian plans. She thought she would like to see how the Fairy Prince in the car was getting on. Meanwhile the air at Angernoune was good, the sands golden, and the lodgings, though amateurish, not worse than other lodgings where they take you in, and pack themselves and a large family into the kitchen for the summer months.

Mrs. Wormeley and Evangeline had brought a large striped Christy Minstrel canvas shelter, set it up on the beach under the lee of the Castle, and sat within it every day when it was fine. They brought their lunch in baskets, and a novel each, and to-day's *Sweep* and a book for the bairn, i.e. Master Albany, who had never run away from his nurse since the day he received that terribly converting shock of the lady with

the long bead necklace coming into his nursery. It would be too much to say he never smiled again, but he certainly never screamed. His mother, when she saw the card in the hall, had suddenly realised that the bead chain was composed of rose diamonds and that their angel visitant was a member of the aristocracy. Her distinguished card still lay in the china tray, dusted and delicately handled, but never covered. The memory of the Lady Dobrée de Saye was kept green. She had called !

Mrs. Wormeley, in the intervals of making purple French knots in her gold-embroidered nightgown case, looked up at the Castle. It impressed her deeply, with all the weight of the grandiose.

" It's a castle and a half, isn't it ? " Thus did she render in colloquial English the effect produced on her by the imposing appearance of the great Norman stronghold of the North.

" Our Ernest may lose," said Evangeline, glumly. " The trial is going on now. The pretender man seems to stick at nothing. I saw something about it in the papers to-day. He seems to have been tampering with the entry of his mother's marriage certificate in some little local church in the south of France."

" Why should he trouble to alter the certificate of his mother's marriage to Sir Joris ? "

" Silly ! It wasn't the certificate of the Veere marriage—I don't know where *that* is—but another. Don't you see, if she married a Frenchman, as they say she did in between whiles, she can't have been legally married to Sir Joris, even if they do find that certificate. Here, let's look it up——"

She rummaged in her frightful canvas bag, embroidered on some previous holiday, and found *The Sweep*.

" See ! *He* didn't tamper with the register, that's proved—but some one else did—in his interests. They arrested that

man and now they've arrested another, and he turns out to be the plaintiff's cousin."

"That sounds fishy!"

"The plaintiff—his name is Ernest Louis—says it was done by some one in the defendant's interests. The defendant's *our* Ernest Rose, see? If Ernest Louis—that's the plaintiff—is found to be illegitimate, then Ernest Rose, up there," she waved her hand in the direction of the Castle, "keeps it as the nephew of Sir Joris. See?"

"No, I don't see. You're not very plain and I'm rather muddled. I never can remember the difference between plaintiff and defendant. You're a novelist, so of course it comes easier."

"And you're a solicitor's wife!"

"Ah, but Mortimer never talks business to me. He says it's degrading. He likes to keep all that apart from the home."

Evangeline laid *The Sweep* down in the sand with a sigh of satisfaction, and resumed the silk tie she was knitting for Dr. Gedge. "I think we writing women should not neglect the arts of peace," she always said. But she could talk and work too, and continued.

"A nervous business for our friend—Betsey's friend, I mean. He's in London now, I suppose, watching his own case. Mrs. Gray said she thought he wasn't in the Castle just now. The flag's down, anyway."

"Oh, but there are a lot of people there still. By the way, didn't Mrs. Gray say there was a man in Lady Dobrée's house party that the vicar preached about last Sunday—the shame of his book being suppressed, don't you know? Did he mean *The Red Corpuscles?* Can it be the man who wrote *The Red Corpuscles?*"

"Not likely. Surely the Castle people wouldn't know any one whose books had been suppressed, though the vicar might. He's a bit advanced, they say. I don't like it in a clergyman,

I must say. The Jaeger vicar, so far, is the only thing I've got against this place."

"I don't know that I mind. It's rather smart to be a free-thinker. It's dowdy to be as thin-skinned as Mortimer, and bother so about morals! And as for Lady Dobrée and her set, I know something of them. She treats authors and so on as she would conjurers and palmists, don't you know, and when it's a general mourning announced, don't a bit mind their coming to her parties wearing colours! I heard that once. It's rather derogatory to the profession, I think. We ought to be careful, to be more conventional than most. Oh, I expect Lee-Brice is *The Red Corpuscles* all right."

"That book always makes me think of Betsey."

"Yes, it does me. You know we were in Wellington's asking for it when the murder of Sir Joris first came out. She was the *calmest* thing, that day!"

"Stunned, probably. So Dr. Gedge always says. By the way, she'd be a widow now, wouldn't she?"

"Ten days ago. I expect she's gone to America. She told me she meant to that day I went to tea with her in Worksop House. I was the only one of her old friends she would see during that awful time——"

"She only saw you once," said Mrs. Wormeley, hastily. "And that was an accident—or more than an accident—so you needn't brag about it. . . . My goodness!"

"What is it?"

"Speak of the——! I'm very much mistaken, or I do believe that is Betsey over there, coming straight towards us! And isn't that her cook's little boy she's got in her hand?"

"It is! Now wasn't I right to get you to come here?"

"We'll have to speak to her!" ejaculated Mrs. Wormeley, becoming very business-like. "Albany, come here. Now mind, you're not to want to go and play with that little boy over there, do you see?"

"Oh, ma, can't I?" begged Master Albany, naturally affected by this prohibition.

Mrs. Wormeley encircled her son's neck with her arm, burying his face in the arm of her jacket. Betsey, shortsightedly plodding towards them—they were in the direct line of the road to the beach—was upon them before she could take thought to avoid the suburban snare set for her.

"Heigh, Betsey!" exclaimed Evangeline, bluntly and shyly. "You're not going to cut me, surely? Shake hands with Mrs. Wormeley, do—let bygones be bygones!"

"They *are* bygones, aren't they?" said Betsey, gently indicating a deep sense of time elapsed. "No, I don't mind shaking hands—twenty hands, if you like?"

Master Albany and Billy, at a good working distance, glared and gloated on each other.

"You've got thinner, Betsey," said Mrs. Wormeley, who had got fatter.

"Have I?"

"And it's not because you're in black?" she insinuated disapprovingly.

"I don't believe in mourning," said Betsey, "even if you're sorry the person has died. I'm not. Can't these two children go and play together?"

"Certainly, if you'll sit down and tell us all about yourself," said Mrs. Wormeley, quite cordially—Betsey always had a way with her. "Not out of sight, mind!" she admonished her child, who was being led away to recondite groves of bent grass by the sturdier, more spirited Billy.

"And how do you come to be here?" she asked judicially, as the married woman, taking the entire conduct of the interview. "Aren't you going to tell us all about it?"

"I'm going to tell you all that you can possibly find out," said Betsey. "Bother you! Well, you must know—you *will* know—I come to be here just as you come to be here. Angernoune is reckoned to be very good air, and I have taken

lodgings with my cook. She happens to have got the post of housekeeper at the Castle. She'll be the one to show you over the Keep on Thursday ! "

" We intended to come," murmured Evangeline.

" You'll be sure to come now, won't you ? " the other said sarcastically. " Remember that I call myself Adamson. That *is* my name, really. I suppose it is no use asking you both not to split on me or talk about me in the village—for if you do I shall have to go, and I'd be sorry, for the place suits me."

" My *dear*, we wouldn't give you away for the world, would we, Evangeline ? Naturally, it's a bit awkward for you—the association—the name Altamont ! . . . How funny it sounds to pronounce it again ! It gives one quite a turn ! So much has happened since then——"

" We won't discuss it. I must be off. Billy has to have his bathe."

" You *are* good to those children, Betsey ! You always were. And Mr. Veere—I used to hear he made quite pets of them ! There was a little girl, wasn't there ? How's she ? "

" All right. She died."

" How can she be all right then, Betsey ? But I suppose you've had a lot of worry, and you're a bit muddled in your mind at times."

Betsey rose to her feet.

" Then are you going to America ? " Mrs. Wormeley inquired.

" No. Who said I was ? "

Miss Simmons broke in. " That last interview we had——"

" When you got into my house on the sly and hid in my bedroom ! Oh, yes, I had some idea of it then. Now I've changed my plans."

" Where *are* you going then ? " Mrs. Wormeley reserved her rightful retributive chaff of Evangeline till later. " Can one know ? "

" I'll send you a card to say where I am when I'm settled,

and then you can have the pleasure of calling—or taking no notice of me. Just which suits you. Good-bye."

"The same as ever!" sighed Mrs. Wormeley the moment Betsey's pretty maidenly back was turned.

"More cynical—and less handsome!" said the other.

"Oh, she was always quite the rudest woman in Wimbledon. We only tolerated her because she was so amusing—and now she isn't even that! Soured! Not so much hair! I wonder, now, I really do, what she has been doing with herself all this time since she left Wimbledon?"

"Running about under an assumed name. And here, in Mr. Veere's house, practically. Her old flame! And he's in and out all day, I expect. There's an underground passage between the Dwelling House and the Keep!"

"Which he uses, you bet!"

"Oh, this *is* a good place to come to!" sighed Evangeline. "One gets taken out of oneself with a vengeance, doesn't one? It's as good as any rest cure to me—to be in the move—in the know. We'll go over the Castle on Thursday, won't we?"

"If she's still there! She'll probably do a bolt, isn't that what they call it . . . ?"

Mrs. Wormeley was staring urgently towards a lonely figure of a woman who had been sitting on the beach, and who, when Betsey passed her, had risen tentatively and sat down again, as if she had repented her impulse to speak to Mrs. Altamont.

"What are you looking at so hard and not attending to me?" asked Evangeline.

"I was thinking how true it was that you said about this being the place to come to. Do you see that girl over there—nicely dressed—good style?"

"She's been there ages. There was a man with her a few moments ago."

"Well, when she first got up to speak to Betsey as she passed, and thought better of it, I noticed her more particularly, and I feel sure it's that Lady Dobrée. When she came

in that day about Albany screaming so, Betsey said I was a muff for not improving the acquaintance. I'm going to do it now! I'm going to speak to her. Lady Dobrée de Saye—that was the name on the card she left on me."

"All right. I'm on."

Taking Albany by the dirty hand and followed by Evangeline, Mrs. Wormeley approached the negligent figure and dashed at it.

"Lady Dobrée, perhaps you may not remember me, but this is the little boy you took such an interest in once in Wimbledon."

"Did I?" said Lady Dobrée, coldly.

"Don't you remember? You were walking up our road in Wimbledon—at least I don't know if you were walking—and you caught sight of Albany, in one of his naughty little tempers. He was having a fine escapade—he's such a highly nervous child—and you saw him running down the road with no clothes on, and called in about it. You're too old now, my sweet, to do that! Speak to the lady and tell her so."

She removed a sticky bun—what she could of it—from her son's mouth, and continued:

"We've got such nice lodgings—Mrs. Gray's—very clean and reasonable. You're in the Castle, of course. We heard. Our landlady knows all about Mr. Veere's house party. A friend of mine—that lady who's just left us—you must have seen her go past—is lodging there, and likes it very much."

"Oh, in the Keep!" A light broke on Lady Dobrée's face, which had been heretofore stiffly made up to repress impertinence. She half rose, and forgetting to be distant, asked eagerly:

"Could you tell me her right name—the name of the one with golden hair—not the dark-haired one?"

"Not so golden as it was!" said Mrs. Wormeley. "But still, Lady Dobrée, if you're really interested in dear Betsey—I think we'll tell her, won't we, Evangeline? . . . She's got

such a very sad life, has poor Betsey, and Lady Dobrée is interested in her."

A pause.

"She's the widow of Altamont, the murderer!"

"Is she really? No, I'm not particularly interested in her, thank you. Good day!"

She did not rise, she did not move from her place, she merely turned her back. And Judas lost his thirty pieces.

XXXV

It was midday. Lady Dobrée, returned from her bathe, wandered round and round the courtyard alone, helplessly throwing croquet balls for Boris to retrieve from the square enclosure of the ruined chapel, and again, returning, examining with a faint curiosity the cockleshells embedded in the wall of the Keep. Mrs. Altamont, had Lady Dobrée but known it, watched her from a window-slit inside, sitting cross-legged in the wide stone *encoignure* that widened out to make a seat-hold in the interior. Golden hair against grey wall, she made a picture which Lee-Brice, the only artist in the *enceinte* of Angernoune, would have known how to admire.

He sat at his own window in the Dwelling House, by a little table, correcting an important batch of proofs for the next post. If he troubled to raise his eyes, he could see Lady Dobrée's peregrinations, but he was bent on finishing the work in hand. He worked methodically. The young lady would not run away.

It was finished, the envelope addressed and stamped. The author rose, and stood in his window full in view. Lady Dobrée, strangely womanly and gentle, came and waited below. She had no notion of flirting: with her the attainment of her immediate object always precluded side-issues, and she was deeply determined on a certain course—or had been, while she mounted the steep sides up to the postern and through to the domain of Angernoune, after her conversa-

tion with the two suburban ladies on the beach. Single-hearted people are generally single-minded as well and drive a straight furrow to their point.

"Have you quite done?" she asked politely.

"Yes. I will go down and post this, and after that I shall be quite at your service."

"I want nothing done for me that another person could do, at least," she replied, sadly. "I'd rather say, 'Alone I did it!' or, 'Alone I don't do it,' will be nearer the mark, I fear."

"You have been circling for a long while round and round the door of the Keep, like the student Wagner's poodle in 'Faust'—but with what objective I cannot guess!"

He joined her on the grass plat. Dobrée looked up at him and said frankly:

"I look like a fool, don't I? The fact is, I want to have a row with a woman and I don't know how to get at her."

"Ah! Ring the bell—or shall I?" He raised his hand. She made a rapid movement. Then she drawled:

"How do you know the person I want is in there?"

"I knew you were stalking the Lady of the Keep. I saw her just now, from my window, go into her fastness. She was a little flurried, I thought, and showed it!"

"She would. That sort of common person!"

"Is she a common sort of person? I think not! She's one of those women you can't classify, for they come under no known category. It's a class that's bred under modern conditions——"

"Like Ernest Veere!" said she, roundly. "Funny! Those two are better pals than you know. I've just found out about her from a couple of impertinent women I met on the sands this morning. They were friends of hers—of Mrs. Altamont's. That's who she is. You don't seem surprised!"

"I suspicioned it."

"I don't believe you a bit. Being a novelist wouldn't surely put you on to that! Now I *had* a sort of inkling, for I found a handkerchief yesterday marked with her name. Here it is!"

"*Pièce de conviction!*"

"Yes, it only needed, after that, for them to tell me which of the Keep women was Mrs. Altamont!"

"Who's the other, then?"

"Her cook!"

"More likely the other woman in the case! . . . a barmaid or a model, wasn't it?"

"I don't know. I didn't at the time take much interest in the Altamont trial, except in so far as it referred to Ernest. The only thing against it is, that if she is really the woman he used to go about with in town, you know—and that there was such a talk about—Ernest would hardly have dared to encourage me, as he did last night, to go and talk to her about it. . . ."

"Not all things—but a few things are possible to Veere that would not be—say, to us! He flies to bluff, resorts to it as a natural weapon, without reference to the delicacy of the position in which you are placed. And it needed some nerve to put you straight on to her!"

"Oh, you can't say Ernest is a coward!"

"Yes, let us leave him something!" He smiled. "Well, why don't you do as he so ungently suggested? Villainy! Seek it out! Have an explanation with her."

"I can't, somehow."

"Because, somehow, you *are* gentle, in the true sense of the word."

"I meant to have a scene with her and I told him so last night. But when I came to think it over this morning, I found I had nothing to kick off from. What was I going to say to

her when I did see her? How was I going to word my complaint? I can't go to her and say, 'Madam—or woman!—you're a murderer's wife and I disapprove of your acquaintance with the man I'm going to marry—that is if I am?'"

His face brightened. He remarked cynically, "That addition would probably take the sting out of your words."

"Why? Oh, I see! And he with her, do you think? I suspected that too. Oh dear, what dirty water we're swimming in! I saw them once together, and I've been restless and irritable ever since. How could he? It was about a week ago, and they were sitting in a cleft in the sandhills about half a mile from here. He was lying on the sand face downwards, with his back to her, like a lover, and she was munching rushes! I felt horrid, and yet I wasn't spying, only walking by. Since then I've hated this place. I wish I was out of it! It's all different—it's a sickening hole, I think. And we're Ernest's guests. . . . Oh, dash!"

She sank on to a bit of a stone plinth lying derelict in the little chapel garden where he had led her. "It seems rather mean to be wild because a man you're not in love with is in love with another woman? My vanity is hurt, I suppose?"

"Oh, no, it isn't that! It is not vanity, it is proper pride. Ernest Veere hasn't behaved well—he doesn't know how to behave, in fact. You are fully entitled to a scene."

He observed her, drooping, conscious and bewildered, unaccustomed to deal with persons of this socially doubtful brand. He tested her again, he wished her to come out of the trial perfectly pure and ladylike.

"Come along, I say, and talk to her. She's in there, I know. I believe she is watching us through one of those loopholes!"

Lady Dobrée started, shrugged her shoulders, and looked thoroughly disgusted.

"Peeping! No, it's no good. I simply can't. I'm shy!"

"Charming! I knew you couldn't," said Mr. Lee-Brice.

XXXVI

The party at Angernoune had been dwindling for some time past. The host was away, autumn stealing on apace. The evenings closed in very cold, with more than a touch of frost. The Dwelling House now tenanted the Blessingtons, Lady Maude Erskine-Robertson, the novelist, and Lady Dobrée only. These five persons nightly attempted to fill beautifully the long narrow table, at the head of which Lady Dobrée had sat from the beginning. The lower end of it, with its melancholy acreage of glistering white tablecloth, now seemed very far away from the little knot of people at the top, who were in such complete sympathy and fashionable accord that conversation was hardly needed to foster the sense of fellowship between them.

They were all in a tale. Lee-Brice, happy to be one of them, albeit casually, fitted in perfectly. No one missed Ernest Veere.

The old butler was severely catechised at every meal as to the date of his master's probable return. No one but he was privileged to know it.

"I could not say, sir. I could not tell, my lady," was his rejoinder, oft repeated. "We have received no official intimation."

"The trial can't surely last many more days," Lord Blessington ejaculated. "They'll find for Veere to-morrow, or thereabouts, I should think!"

"I hope so, I'm sure, my lord."

"Brookie knows more than he chooses to tell us," Lady

Maude whispered to her neighbour, Mr. Lee-Brice. "I don't care for these so old family servants. They're past work and they are no more faithful than the others, and they have a deal more data to betray you on. That man's been hearing from Veere every day, I fancy, and knows to a minute when he'll arrive. What does it matter, we are very happy as we are? Veere's a dear fellow, but there's a certain sense of relief at his absence, don't you think? If it was nothing else, Dobrée seems more at ease, doesn't she?"

"How wicked you are!"

"A weight off her mind," continued Lady Maude, "and something else nice and effervescing there instead."

"She looks very well to-night, if a little preoccupied?"

"Dobrée's always preoccupied—with self, of course, and it's against her looks. There's often a strong determination of personality to the tip of the nose! 'Sh'h! She's a dear little girl—and you mean to marry her!"

"My dear lady!"

"Authors always call one that," said Lady Maude, bluntly. "It's a little way they have. But don't be cross. As a race, you are very different nowadays from the Early Victorian variety. Selection, I suppose—Mudie's! The old lot didn't go out so much, and they drank deeper. Imagine Wilkie Collins or Anthony Trollope having the slightest chance of marrying a girl like Dobrée!"

"Wanting to, even!" said he, haughtily.

"Aha! I've got you to admit it! Well—well! Prosper you! You will call yourself De Saye, I presume?"

"You go rather quick, don't you, dear Lady Maude? She's still engaged to another man, more or less."

"So much less! I made that engagement—I'll unmake it if I think fit. She's, though obstinate, fairly impressionable, and the worst of her is that when you have got her jogged to a particular course of action, she takes all the credit of the initiative to herself. Oh, of course, you'll marry her! It's

indicated. Do you think, if it hadn't been, I'd have consented to such a dull time of it here? I've been simply bored to death. I came intending to have long Kreutzer-Sonata-like talks, leading to nothing, with you about our triple-stained pasts, and instead you've been occupying your time corrupting the *ingénue*. If I wasn't a student of human nature and hadn't had dear little decadent Vallance and good, steady old Blessington for a derivative, I'd have gone long since. It's a bit more amusing now that poor Ernest is away. Isn't it odd—for a clever boy like him, how ill he goes with us! He doesn't amalgamate a bit. He belongs over there!" She indicated the region where the Keep was supposed to lie with a sweep of her jewelled fingers.

"I agree with you that it is so, and he will find it out presently."

"He's too straight—I don't say in business, but socially—for us. Too literal, too slavish, too simple. He keeps his wits for his trade, I suppose. We don't want inventions—we want epigrams. Solid qualities that will wash are no good to us. We don't want things to wash—we like to knock them out and have done. Now you do all right. You're clever!"

"I would never allow a man to call me so!" replied Lee-Brice, swallowing a little in his throat.

"I say what I like," said Lady Maude, perfectly apprehending and regardless of his feelings. "Always did. Let the glass-house authors beware! If they don't like my brusqueness they can leave it alone—or say it's smart! I do you good, you know. . . . All right, Dobrée, I'm collected . . . Mr. Lee-Brice has refused to amuse me any more!"

They passed into the big drawing-room, beyond which, and three or four grades lower, loomed the vaster depths of the ballroom. It was unlit to-night for some reason or other. Brooks's orders, which no one, not even Lady Dobrée, ever ventured to contravene! There were two doors at the far end, one of which led into a corridor and what was presumed to be

the old kitchen of the Castle, the other into that room which had been Sir Joris's study. Veere used that now and then, when he had business, and as a sanctum to retire to when he had the sulks.

A dart was made for the morning papers. Lord Blessington took one and Mr. Lee-Brice the other. The maxim, "*Place aux dames*," did not operate; women are generally supposed to be willing to be served last with news. They shimmered about aimlessly, by the big standard lamps that were clasped in the mailed fists of knights impossibly armed in the purlieus of Wardour Street. They remained on the raised plateau of the drawing-room floor, and treated the lower plane of the unlit ballroom as the waters of the unknown lying at their feet. The effect was ghostly enough, and Lady Maude, gossiping with Dobrée, both outlined against the dark, looked like Geraldine, with her soft green draperies and wicked light hair, betraying a Christabel. . . . A door banged somewhere at the end of the dancing-hall, and Lady Maude shivered.

"I'm rather sorry I *décolletéed* to please you," she complained, "for there are some fearsome draughts about! I believe one of those doors at the end of the hall is open? Can't one of you men go and shut it? I would, but I'm afraid of the ghosts of armed men and walled-in nuns. That was a chapel beyond—or was it the kitchen? The ghost of a mediæval cook would be enough for me. I wouldn't go down to the end of the room alone for the world!"

Both men ignored her appeal, so deeply were they interested in their papers. Lady Maude, psychic as usual, felt a brain wave, and grew perturbed. . . . Just as she was about to speak Lord Blessington looked up, dropped his eye-glass on the floor, and exclaimed: "Good God!"

Mr. Lee-Brice looked up out from his particular journal in which the same item of news had caught his superior natural eye a few moments ago, but he had chosen to keep quiet and let some one else chirrup it out.

"What is it, Blessington?" asked Lady Maude, fretfully. "You didn't 'Good God' like that about a bit of pebble! Is it something about Ernest Veere?"

"Yes. He's lost his case, that's all!"

"Veere! Lost his case!" cried the lady. "Here, let me see!"

Tripping herself up in her tight skirts, she ran to Lord Blessington, who, without the aforesaid pebble, was helpless and of no further use to any one. She roughly took his paper from him, while he groped senilely on the floor for his glass. Dobrée, meanwhile, had swung across to where Mr. Lee-Brice was sitting.

"The other man's proved it—proved it to the hilt!" shouted Lady Maude. "They have found that he's the lawful son of Sir Joris all right—or all wrong! Oh, my poor Ernest! I like him, you know, and always shall!"

"How generous of you, now he's a pauper!" grumbled Lord Blessington, still as it were on four feet looking for his eye-glass.

"He can appeal," said Lee-Brice, quietly.

"But he won't!" said Lady Dobrée. "I know him. He's an utter crank!"

She spoke indifferently, carelessly, as if interested in something else. . . . Her eyes were dilated, her attitude tense, as she stared fixedly into the depths of the dancing-hall.

"What is it, Dobrée?" Lady Maude asked irritably. "You look as if you had just seen a ghost—the ghost of a fortune, eh, my girl?"

"I don't want to drive you all into hysterics," said the young lady, still peering intently into the blackness. "But if you ask me, I am convinced there's some one there."

Lady Maude then screamed. The sound of what seemed to be a distant lock catching was distinctly heard. . . . Lord Blessington came up from behind the console.

"I've got it—got my eyes!" said he triumphantly. "Now let's have a look."

"Oh, damn your eyes!" cried Lady Maude, impatiently. "You won't know what's happening with them any more than you did without, will he, Mary? Do, somebody, have some sense and turn up the lights down there, please!"

Lord Blessington, anxious to retrieve his position in the lady's good graces, girded his old loins to tread the slippery floor of the ballroom and find the switch that would illuminate it and dispel all contumacious shadows. Dobrée, leaning over Lee-Brice's shoulder, was conning the details of the trial. The author's beautiful calm under the misfortune of another fascinated her. She was his from that moment, and he knew it. Henceforth there were only arrangements to be made, engagements to be politely cancelled, ways and means to be found, and old tracks to be smoothed over. He knew he had Lady Maude's suffrage—the middle-aged Society woman who bear-led this self-willed maiden. The girl herself unconsciously leant on his arm, with all the weight of confidence reposed by a simple stalwart nature, when at an early, non-critical age it surrenders itself to a profound psychologist and man of the world.

The switch had been found—one of them—and the shadows of the dancing-hall partially dispelled. But Lady Maude was still whimpering . . . suggesting horrors . . . half pretending, half serious. . . . Lady Dobrée drew herself up and spoke coldly:

"Dear Maude, don't you think we have had enough nonsensical talk of this kind? Why should you trouble to raise the ghost of—*my* ancestors, when you come to think? For Ernest has got no ghosts!" Lee-Brice worshipped the drawing up of her proud young lips with which she said this. "There's nothing there, you see, and the door of Ernest's study is locked, so Lord Blessington says. It always is if he's away, I know. Brookie has strict instructions. So it can't have been that door you heard closing. Don't have hysterics just now when there's so much to do and think of."

"Of course not!" said Mary Blessington, sensibly. "Maude isn't really afraid of spooks, we knew, or of anything. She's upset by the news, that's all! We all are!"

"As far as I can make out," said her husband, who had been studying *The Times* assiduously, "we have none of us any right here in this house at all! It doesn't belong to Ernest Veere, whose guests we are, any more!"

"Surprising intelligence you do show sometimes, Blessington!" said his wife. "But I don't see, even if it is as you say, that we can be expected to turn out at once—to-night! We can pay the pretender his hotel bill when he takes possession, if you like!"

"I dare say we shall all sleep as sound in Ernest Louis's bed as in Ernest Rose's," said Dobrée, ingenuously, and every one laughed, glad that the tension was removed.

"I wonder what he's like—the pretender, I mean?" whispered Lady Blessington.

"He's not the pretender any more," retorted Lady Maude, also in a low voice, to her friend. "Our Ernest is the outsider now. I say, if Ernest Louis is at all presentable, might the engagement be transferred, do you think?"

"Papa Angernoune would be quite willing, I expect," replied Lady Blessington. "But you *are* wicked, Maude!"

"Not so. '*Tempora mutantur*' . . . Come along, my little Dobrée, for it's late and there's a lot to be done to-morrow. Let us all betake ourselves to the comfortable couch of Ernest Louis. I mean to have my nice drug-sleep, in spite of the sudden change of dynasty. It's freezing, too, to-night, I believe. I wonder where poor old Ernest is?"

She drew her arm through that of Lady Dobrée, as they went upstairs. It proved a stiff, irresponsive member. Lady Dobrée was "off" her whilom friend and mentor. But the habits of intimacy of five years could not be so lightly discontinued, and the young girl dutifully answered her chaperon's questions, albeit as shortly as she dared.

" What are you going to do about it, dear ? "

" The only thing."

" Throw him over ? "

" Yes."

" Have you got the other safe ? "

" Yes. Good night ! "

" How that girl has grown up in the last few days," thought the practised coquette, as she gained her own room and Chaytor's discreet ministrations. " It is Lee-Brice who has brought her on so. Extraordinary power these journalistic people have, like the medicine-man or priest of a savage tribe ! It's all mumbo-jumbo that they shove at you, but in choice literary phrases ! He has looks too, and pots of money ! These royalties on his books that he talks of, now—I don't quite understand, but whatever it is, it goes on and on accumulating ! It's really hardly fair. Now, poor little Vallance—no money, no inches, only a title ! Veere none of the three ! I suppose I shall have to console him ! They'll all leave him now—like the rats in a sinking ship. I know us—we're a low lot, in our way."

She turned in.

Dobrée, entering her vast apartment on the West Turret, took up a position near the crooked window that commanded the western wall of the Keep, and commanded Parker to brush her hair, as she stood there, till she was told to desist, and not to talk.

Parker would have liked to tell her mistress that Betsey's room fronted the north, knowing full well that the pretty golden-haired cicerone was Lady Dobrée's real objective. But she obeyed in silence—a temporary silence as she knew it would be. The girl soon spoke.

" We shall be leaving here to-morrow, Parker."

" Yes, my lady. Where for, my lady ? "

" Hell ! " said Lady Dobrée, with sombre emphasis, but Parker was not much startled. She settled in her mind that

the luggage would have to be labelled Castle de Saye—or perhaps Low Water, both family entrenchments where the wounded doe might retire for a season.

"Very well, my lady," she replied. "I'll write the labels."

Lady Dobrée said nothing, but continued to gaze out of the window into the black night.

The unconfidential maid could not resist the opportunity of allowing her mistress to see that she was as well primed with information as any one else, and was perfectly well acquainted with the cause of her meditated flight.

"There's a lot of talk in the village, my lady! You know that Mrs. Adamson in the Keep—well, she isn't really Mrs. Adamson at all! She's Mrs. Altamont, the wife—widow, I should say—of the murderer of Sir Joris Veere. They say that Mr. Veere oughtn't to have let her be about here, stopping free in Sir Joris's own place—that it's hardly decent——"

"Hold your tongue, Parker."

"Yes, my lady."

"And yet that's boring. I want to hear what they do say, so you had better go on."

"There are two ladies in the village, my lady, lodging with Mrs. Gray in Chesters, and they say they knew Mrs. Altamont quite well, in Wimbledon, where they all live. Nasty low subbub it is, to be sure. Near your uncle's, though. And Mr. Ernest was never out of the house where Mrs. Altamont lived—Worksop House, I think they called it. And driving her about in his motor-car and all! And then bringing her here under a false name! Seems as if he could not bear to be parted from her——"

"I don't want you to tell me any more, Parker, thank you very much. That will do. Remember we go to-morrow. I dare say some of the others will be going too. Mr. Lee-Brice is, I know." Complacently she laid her young head on the pillow and composed herself to sleep.

XXXVII

As Lady Maude had said, the first prickly cold of autumn was in the air. It was a night to turn in as quickly as possible; but Betsey, in her haunted chamber in the old Keep, lingered, threw clothes into bags, undid her hair in sections, and leaned on the wide window-sill, refraining, however, from lifting the pane of glass that stood between her and the cold wind that roved over the North Sea and now and then smote her window desultorily, as earnest of what it could do if roused. She thought once, as she leaned very near the pane, that she heard the snort of a motor down at the garage, but thought better of it. Then Boris the hound barked solemnly. . . . The moon was rising over the Bear Rocks and the ghostly crag of Spindleston. . . . Soon a flood of silver was spilled unevenly over the plain of waters . . . faintly moving under the summoning moonbeams. . . .

It seemed to toll, rather than strike, one by the Castle clock, and some one knocked at the door of her room.

"Get up, Betsey. Come and speak to me!"

She removed her elbows from the sill and quietly admitted Ernest Veere.

"You're dressed!"

"Did you expect me to come without?" She laughed. But she grew serious, as the sense of his attitude was perceived by her. She knew his imperturbable, inexpressive face so well now, that the least ripple of emotion was significant to her as the removal of a landmark.

"Betsey, I'm a ruined man!"

She understood at once. Her line was taken.

"Then we will to the greenwood go! You dear, to come and tell me first!"

Her warm arms were round his neck, her kisses on his mouth. . . . The young man, lapped in sensuous ease, the nervous tension he had suffered during the last few days relaxed by the warm aroma of affection she diffused, murmured, repeating the phrase automatically, "I've lost my case, Betsey! I've lost my case!"

"Of course you have. I'm sorry. I'm glad. You'll marry me now you are ruined, won't you?"

She released him. There was a suggestion in her gesture of granting him his unfettered freedom to answer. He smiled wryly, half pleased, half rueful. . . .

"Well, that's one way of taking it!"

She drew him into the room, and they sat down on the bed, and he took her in his arms. They rocked together; he groaned a little like some one hurt and she was consoling. He was very cold, indeed, chilled through and through with his recent long motor ride from Berwick. She apprehended that, but forbore to question him about it. She was not one for asking questions. To his body she communicated her own reserve of warmth, while to his distressed ego her seeming selfish optimism was on the whole as soothing as condolences could have been. It induced the cheerful reflection in him that some one at least was happy, some one's ship had come safely to port, indirectly though it might be, through his own disaster. He stroked her cheek; she pressed it against his cold hand as an animal might rub its soft velvet nose against his master. His eyes were full of unshed tears, hers were wet too, but brilliant, sparkling with new-found happiness. So they sat and swayed in loving unison.

The solitary candle, placed high on the chest of drawers, guttered in the draught, for Veere had left the door open and Betsey had not thought of shutting it. There was no danger

of disturbing Ada and her child, who slept on the floor below. The predestined pair were alone in the night.

The man was broken, he seemed to her motherliness like an arrogant pampered child who had had a severe fall. The woman could almost imagine herself feeling for the bump on his forehead that it was her mission to kiss and make well. He pitied himself so. But though she comforted and assuaged him cunningly, she did not choose to dissimulate her own personal gladness.

Veere began to talk, to unbosom himself in the old way. He first sought her soft, tingling hand in the semi-obscurity, and held it, punctuating his sharp, sad sentences with grips and squeezes.

"Betsey, I'm nothing now. I'm a ne'er-do-well—a nobody! I've been listening to those wretched people in the Dwelling House——"

"Your guests?"

"They were. They're Ernest Louis's guests now, and he's half a foreigner! God! He'll be settling here now. They'll hate it worse than me. Betsey, I heard them, they were discussing me. It was like assisting at my own funeral——"

"Listeners never hear any good of themselves," she said, with mock gravity.

He apologised in all seriousness. "It was only for a moment, quite by accident, in the end of the big hall, as I crossed to my study from the kitchen entrance there. They heard the door opening, and they thought I was a ghost—the ghost of one of *her* ancestors, I suppose? Ha! Ha! I had to pass—quickly, for fear they switched on the light, but not before I'd heard enough to convince me of the value of the liking they'll transfer to the other man! I had time to see my Dobrée—leaning on Lee-Brice's arm with all her weight, no joke—and breathing down his neck—whispering to him."

"She's only a child," said Betsey, who in her happiness felt she could afford to be generous. If she had not loved

Ernest Veere, she could not have borne to hear him talk so, even of a girl who was preparing to jilt him. She was what she was. With some finer-spun women, love would have made compliance in his attitude the more impossible. She added softly :

" There's no harm in her. A nice girl, I think. And he's a nice man, far better suited to her than you. They'll find arms and ancestors for him, and he'll become them all right. . . . Listen, Ernest, about our own dear little affairs. . . . You and I *are* going to be married, aren't we ? "

He kissed her. " Yes, but what about Dobrée ? "

" She won't want you now. She'll cart you. After what you told me, I should just think so. She wouldn't lean heavily on a man for nothing, a stiff girl like that ! And the true business-woman she is at bottom will throw you over the moment she hears that you're only a pauper."

" Don't be brutal. I have a little."

" Not much, eh ? But that's no matter, you've got your great talent, and little me to help you ! "

He patted her shoulder. The shadow of a smile lurked in the corners of his rather cruel mouth. He spoke in her ear :

" There's another thing, Betsey—you have always said you didn't love me ! "

" Does this look like it ? " she cried, embracing him closely without stint or pretence of reticence. " Ernest, I have never in my life kissed any one as I am kissing you." Her voice was deep with passion, melodious with heretofore concealed emotions. " I adore you—truth ! I swear I do."

" Well, but at the most important moment of all—the crisis in Worksop House, you remember ?—when you consented to run away with me, you swore firmly you didn't, and hurt my feelings very much—quite indelibly, I fear ! "

Though she knew he was teasing her, she answered him seriously, putting him away from her a little.

" I didn't love you then, when you had just made me dis-

honourable proposals—in the car—coming home one night—do you remember? I thought it so horrid of you."

"It *was*—horrid of me!"

"Yes, commonplace, stupid, showed a thorough want of understanding, don't you know? It annoyed me and hurt me, though I tried to be polite and not huffy, for you had been so very kind. But all the same, it completely dashed the poor little plant of Love that was just beginning to grow up in me. And of course, that day, later on, when Wilfrid, my husband, was condemned, and I consented, as you say, to go with you on your own odious terms, that was temper—nothing in the world but temper! I was enraged—with the British public, for begging him off and sending me back to slavery. That was my lowest ebb of morality, a regular lapse into beastliness, and I have been jolly well punished for it."

"How?" said Veere, indulgently. The candle on the chest of drawers guttered and went out with a plop!

"I've got another, somewhere," said Betsey, unwinding herself from his arms. Rising stiffly, she took a fresh bit of candle out of a drawer, round which she folded a piece of paper, and methodically proceeded to insert it in the candlestick on the smoking ruins of the old wick, talking all the while. . . .

"Well, you see, in Paris . . . when you behaved so—exceptionally, I felt so desperately snubbed that I rather hated you!"

"But, my dear, don't you see, I couldn't possibly have profited by your forced submission—forced by circumstances! I regretted it, but do you think I didn't see that you only came to me out of temper? Why should a woman hate one for behaving decently?"

"Women do resent that sort of thing, in a way, though they don't, as a rule, admit it. It sounds so very awkward and coarse."

"You're not afraid of admitting anything, are you, Betsey?"

"I'm a bit exceptional too, I suppose. And, to continue with my punishment. . . . As a result of that worry and disappointment, and being thrown back on myself, I got as nervous as a cat. I was all on edge somehow. I was riding on a needle-point all day and all night. You couldn't help noticing how cross and irritable I was!"

"Rather not!"

"Any woman would be the same, thrown back on herself—thrown back *to* herself like that, no matter how wrong it was of her to give herself away in the first instance. I fretted—I worried—I cried—I lost all my looks!"

"No, no!"

"Well, half my looks. That punishes you, too, for you're going to marry me, aren't you, now? Mrs. Ernest Veere won't be a roaring beauty, I'm afraid, but a real good sort, with the remains of looks. We'll do all right, won't we? It was intended, our marriage, from the beginning, Ernest, only you didn't realise, but tore off on your wild goose chase, after the aristocracy that didn't want you. I always knew, but while you were full of this craze for marrying a title, how could I, in decency, contend with it, interested as I was, personally? I just had to wait until you came to your senses, and with the horrible fear that perhaps you never would—until it was too late. Only, luckily, this came!"

"You needn't be so pleased because I have lost a fortune."

"And got me!"

"Betsey, I can do nothing with you! You are——"

"In your arms!" she cried, triumphantly nestling.

"By the way, why were you still up and dressed at this hour?"

"Oh, I must tell you. They have found out who I am here."

"What matter?"

"Not now, of course. Dear Ernest, so we *are* going to be married! You darling, to say it! But before, you know, you said you didn't want people to guess that you were still keeping on with the notorious Mrs. Altamont, and you asked me to call myself by my real name. I thought it rather cunning and neat of you, for Adamson isn't so very unlike Altamont, and it looks so innocent to go so near. But listen! I met two wretched women—cads—out of my old life, on the sands—simply ran into them. I'm a little short-sighted. And oh, how I longed to kick the sand up into their horrid fat faces when I recognised them!"

"Betsey, no, that wouldn't have been the grand manner."

"Oh, leave that nonsense to those people in the Dwelling House that have chucked you. Well, I didn't fling any sand, I realised the need for diplomacy. I sat down beside them and entreated them fairly, hoping they would perhaps leave me and my story alone. They told me I had grown thinner and plainer——"

"Did they really?"

"Oh, it's true. I have. Fretting about you! I could see they weren't to be bound, but would blow on me the first chance they got to give themselves consequence. They have. They've told all the village, and I suppose your sweetheart's maid has told *her*, for I've watched her all the morning, since, trying to get at me, and make a scene. Poor little innocent thing, she was too well bred, after all, and gave it up! She really *is* a nice girl. But I had made up my mind to do what you'd like and catch the eight o'clock at Haggerdon, and I was packing up. . . ."

"And what about me?"

"I'd have written to you, dear, from the wilds of London lodgings. I shouldn't have deserted you, no fear, I love you too much. Only novel heroines go off in huffs, leaving no clue to their whereabouts—so difficult, too, to manage! Even a clever criminal can't. I'm just an ordinary woman with my

wits about me. And it's a good thing I didn't get off, as things have turned out, for now, perhaps, we can go together. Let's!"

"You forget. I'm not jilted yet."

"You will be, before noon to-day. I'll sit tight here till you come to me. Then we'll shake the fine dust of them off our feet and do a bolt into the blue. They're not for us—not our sort. They have their merits—I say she's a nice little girl!—but their virtues are not yours or mine! Good form—good birth—wait till they're on a desert island, or on an airship, as you and I'll be before we're done! You're going to invent—you're going to be a great man—unhampered by a silly fortune. You're as clever as paint, Ernest. I love you better for being a bit of a bounder! Now go. The second candle's going out and I've got no more."

XXXVIII

Parker pottered about the now nearly empty bedroom, making all the final arrangements for departure. Lady Dobrée, neat, tailor-made, with her strong boots on, handed over her keys and went downstairs.

The gong had just sounded. She opened the door of the breakfast-room as the last reverberations echoed through the house. Brooks was ringing it with a will. His face was set like that of an old priest at the mass. She discovered Veere alone, hovering over the sideboard.

"Good morning!" he said quietly. "What can I get you? Ham? Eggs? Devilled kidney?"

Lady Dobrée, full of tragic resolve, borne down by the weight of her own affairs, her mood leavened by a dash of condolence for this extraordinarily jaunty victim of circumstance, was much taken aback, and replied meekly, "Some devilled kidney, please!"

He procured a plateful for her, and then directed his attention to another table where stood a hissing urn and many jugs.

"Tea or coffee?"

"Tea. But I should like——"

"Well, why don't you have what you like?"

"Bother you, Ernest!"

"How nice it sounds to hear you say that again!"

"I'm afraid what I want to say won't sound very nice."

"Oh, why not? Eat your breakfast, now, my dear, and then we'll see. Always have a scene on a good breakfast!"

"I'm not going to make you a scene, Ernest—far from it. Only—bother you—I don't in the least know how to take this—that has happened to us!"

"To me!" he corrected gravely. "Well, take a lesson from Lady Blessington. Watch her. She's always quite correct."

Lady Blessington sailed in timidly, as a rabbit which has strayed into a neighbouring warren, and deprecatingly seized both hands of Veere, and squeezed them portentously.

"My poor boy!"

"I *am* poor."

"I know. We heard last night. I could not sleep. Ought we all to go? Surely?"

"Well, soon!" said he, "unless you stop to receive Ernest Louis."

"My dear boy, how can you laugh?"

"That I may not weep!" said he, winking at Lady Dobrée, who found his Jack Sheppard-like attitude charming, and, now that she had made up her mind to jilt him, resented his making himself regretted.

"I was telling Ernest how sorry we all were for this bother," she said, "and suggesting that we ought all to go."

"And I told you," he said sturdily, "to eat your breakfast first, at all events. I think my hospitality can run to that. Here's Lady Maude——"

Lady Maude came in, bade a languid good morning to the others, extended a flaccid hand to Veere, and drifted towards the sideboard.

"They've moved my aspirin!" she observed drearily, hunting about. Veere ran forward. . . .

"I think you'll find it here on the ledge. I took one to calm my own spirits."

"Yes, of course, you must be having any amount of low spirits. It's too bad. Ernest, don't you think us all horrid?" she asked, sitting down to cold game pie.

"Dear me, no, you are all charming, so full of soulful reticence. It is only that I, somehow, seem to have lost all my point. What am I doing here? . . . Joy! Here's Mr. Lee-Brice! He's a host in himself. Now I'll leave you all. I have some work to do, as you can imagine, and he will look after you!"

Veere shook hands cordially with the author in the doorway. Not a word was spoken. The freemasonry between two essentially good fellows served to bridge the gulf set across successful and unsuccessful. The author had no need of words to convey the correctness of his attitude and the sufficiency of sympathy he was able to place at the service of the man who had lost a fortune and was now to lose the titled bride who went with it. Veere was not really to be pitied. He was to find his happy level by and by. Lee-Brice was well aware of the golden-haired mitigation of the blow that existed in the shape of the beloved waiting for her lover in the grey old Keep opposite. Veere would fall on his feet, or rather, on the breast of a kind woman that adored him as he was—a decent young fellow—without tact, or chic, or art-feeling.

He sat down, in a masterful way, in the chair next Lady Dobrée, on which she had carelessly laid her handkerchief. He handed it to her. They ate together in silence. The other two women, declaring that they meant to ask Brookie for a Bradshaw, presently sidled out. The two were alone.

"I have not had a chance of speaking to Ernest yet," said she, peeling a peach.

"What, not to condole!"

"Oh, yes, that! But I mean I haven't told him yet that I am going to throw him over! I don't fancy he'll care at all, but still, it's an unpleasant sort of thing to blurt out, just when a man's down!"

"The nail of one disappointment will knock out the other."

"I don't flatter myself the second nail will be strong enough," she replied modestly. "Besides, the first is the

cause of the second. I happen to know that I'm so constructed that I cannot stand poverty—I can't even stand the hand-to-mouth existence I am leading now, with a cheap maid and 'little' dressmaker, any longer. And even if you *are* good enough to go on helping me, I shall never be able to make anything by writing!"

"But it's a smart thing and a profitable for husband and wife to collaborate. The Markhams do a roaring business. Their joint royalties amount to——"

"You would have to change your form a good deal before a woman could be seen dead collaborating with you, wouldn't you!" Lady Dobrée said, trying to hide her very comparative degree of embarrassment.

He laughed. "Good! Very good! But let me tell you I have exhausted that phase of myself. I shall write no more books to be burned by the common hangman. I've worked that vein sufficiently. I've done my work of 'pure ablution round our human shores.' I can take the other thing in my stride. I shall give my attention henceforth to the Beautiful, the Pure, the Clean—I shall aim at a rectory circulation, in fact!"

"All right," she laughed. "I'm with you—on the cover of that book, at all events. The rest, well, we must get things settled first. . . . I can count on you, can't I?"

"Throughout! From cover to cover," he said. The literary form of courtship appealed to this wayward child, as he could see. She smiled and said seriously:

"Would you mind calling Ernest? I hear him outside there, talking to Brookie. I think I'll settle things now if I can."

"Brava!" said he. Going to the door, he called:

"Mr. Veere, Lady Dobrée wants you."

Turning to the young girl, who had risen, he added: "And now I'll leave you."

"Please don't. . . . Ernest, I think of going home to-day. Can I be motored over to Low Water?"

"Certainly. It's quite the best plan for you," he answered stolidly, leaning against the jamb of the door.

She looked nonplussed. "But don't you see what that means?"

"What does it mean? I am waiting to hear."

Lady Dobrée was vexed with his nonchalance and spoke out hardily.

"It means, Ernest, that I am a thoroughly worldly woman, and that, barring a certain amount of liking which I'm not cad enough to deny, I was in the main marrying you for money."

He bowed. "Money which I haven't got. That settles me."

"Yes. And——" she hesitated, and then looked at Lee-Brice, who stood, conventionally drooping, but with the springs of action tense and ready to move in her service. "Did you realise why I wouldn't let this man go and let us have our talk alone?"

Veere laughed rather noisily. "My dear Dobrée, nothing surely could have been more obvious, even to my limited social intelligence. You have taken a weight off my mind. I'm delighted with you—both. Will you go on being my friends? Don't go, Lee-Brice, stay here, and let us all be sensible and plain dealing. Lady Dobrée has given us the cue. Dobrée, shall I say what you want to say for you?"

"You may try," said the girl, smiling.

"Well, it is this. Not much. You have heard that I am a pauper—what amounts to a pauper, since it doesn't amount to an income worthy of you and your aims. You are therefore desirous of breaking off, here and now, our absurd and improper engagement."

"That's it—to a 't'—only I shouldn't perhaps have used the word absurd of anything I once thought fit to do."

"You always were a bit of a prig, dear. Well, it's all right now, isn't it? I think I'll have some more breakfast."

He felt one of the milk jugs to see if the milk it contained was still warm. . . . He shook his head disappointedly, and turned up the wick below the brass stand that supported it a little higher. . . .

The author, immensely moved and interested by this scene, would not have given up his front place at the show for worlds. He handed Ernest Veere the sugar. Lady Dobrée ministered to her whilom lover with the cream.

"And since we are all so friendly," she said, "are you going to marry Mrs. Altamont?"

"Betsey? Certainly," he replied, with his mouth full.

"Well, that's cool!" Lady Dobrée ejaculated involuntarily.

"We're all cool—damn cool. I've been admiring it. So is the bacon, by the way."

By this time Lady Dobrée was quite at her ease. With a little shrug at Lee-Brice, she entered heartily into the spirit of the thing. She was no actress, but she attempted to draw up her mouth into an expression of disappointment.

"And I am to be left lamenting?"

"I'm afraid so—if your standard of living continues so high that it takes a millionaire to cope with it. . . . 'For I must to the greenwood go, alone, a banished man.' No, not alone, thank God!"

He munched and helped himself to a peach. . . . Lee-Brice, laughing, came forward and took Lady Dobrée's hand:

"Dear lady—if my poor royalties——?"

THE END

WILLIAM BRENDON AND SON, LTD.
PRINTERS, PLYMOUTH

University of California
SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY
405 Hilgard Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90024-1388
Return this material to the library
from which it was borrowed.

JUL

114/KNV

MAR 0 5 1999

DUE 2 WKS FROM DATE RECEIVED

UCLA ACCESS SERVICES BL19

Research Library

REC'D LD-URL

APR 2 0 1999

UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY
AA 000 384 537 7

3 1158 01240 1609

PR
3015
H91w